Wild West Stories

AND COMPLETE NOVEL MAGAZINE

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

JULY

15¢

SIX GUN HELL FOR A TROUBLESHOOTER

...ction-packed novel by

...ORTON L. JAMES

GUNMAN'S CODE by ED EARL REPP

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Wild West Stories AND COMPLETE NOVEL MAGAZINE

Number 135 *July, 1938, Issue*

A BIG ACTION-PACKED NOVEL PAGE

SIX-GUN HELL FOR A TROUBLE SHOOTER...by Norton L. James 8

The bloody hand of a gun boss ruled Ridoro range in the wake of its gold strike, and Jim Severance went there aiming only to fulfill his own grim mission of death—but he stayed to slam lead in defense of a girl who hated him fiercely!

3 ROARING NOVELETTES

GUNMAN'S CODE .....by Ed Earl Repp 70

A curl of smoke rose from the muzzle of his old .44 Colts—and Bill Deever became an outcast who could find soul redemption only on a killer's vengeance trail!

BOUNTY FOR AN OUTLAW.....by Luke Tyler 80

An owlhoot killer fogged in from the dark trails to warn Stub Ashton he was one ugly hombre when crossed—which was both bad news and a good gunsmoke omen for Ashton's trigger finger!

BLOOD TRAIL .....by Dick Robson 90

Deputy Marshal Bill Lane risked dishonor and a bandit's bushwhack bullets to side that owlhooter in a powdersmoke showdown against the law!

4 SMASHING SHORT STORIES

RENEGADES SHOULDN'T BE RUSTLERS.....by Sherman Baker 100

That bank-robbing renegade stole a good horse for his getaway—too good a horse!

BUCK A PAT HAND—AND DIE!.....by Eric Thane 103

Hunkered there in Plentywood Gulch pat-handing poker cards, Wheel 'Em Bredeen dealt himself into a gun-thundering range feud—with a pretty girl the queen in that death-stacked deck!

BAR-WINDOW BRAND .....by James R. Webb 113

Could young Mike Fallon honorably blot out the jail-bird brand which had turned honest men against him, and left him in a trap of lobo trigger treachery?

GUNSMOKE GRUBSTAKE .....by John Carlisle 122

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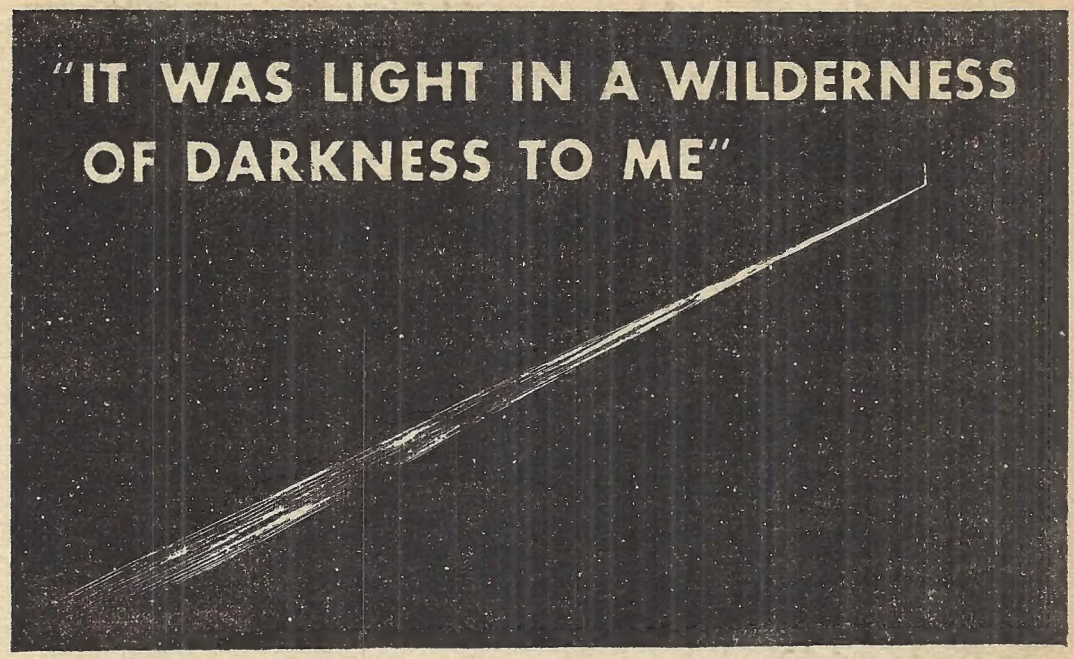

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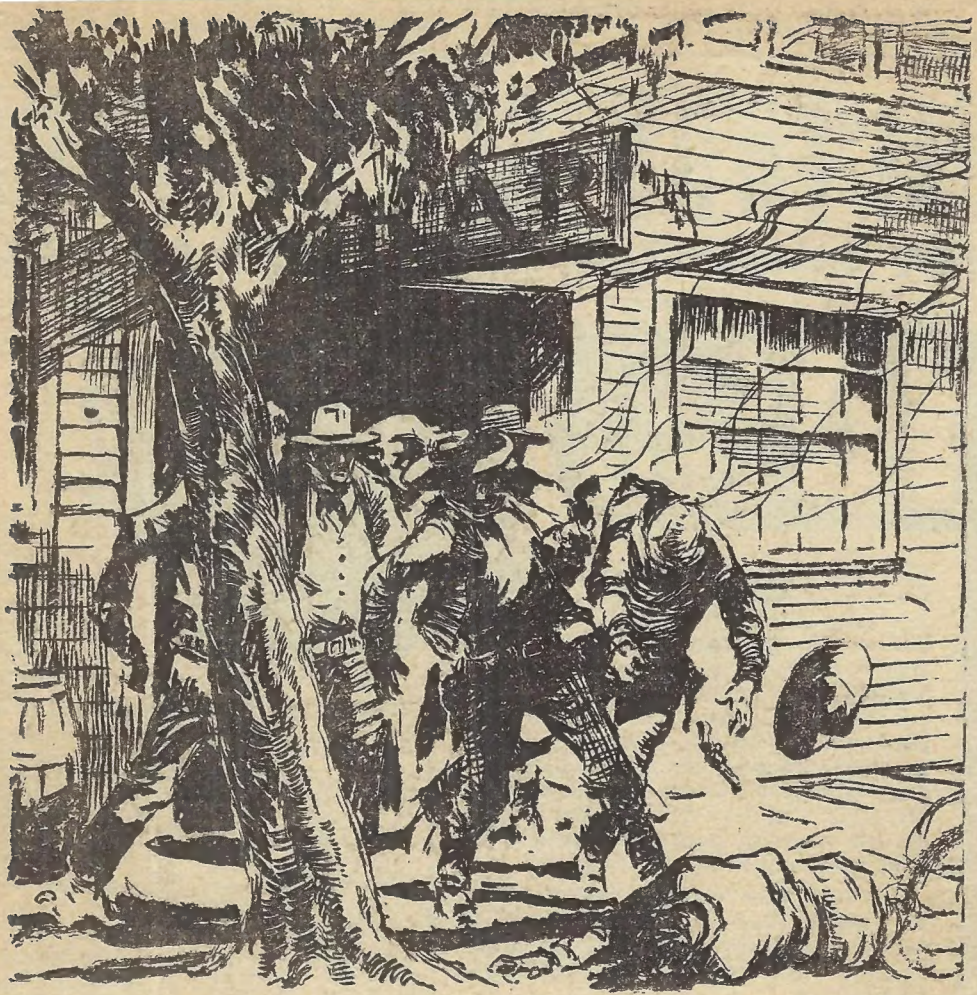

CHAPTER I

GOLD ON SUNSET RANCH

JIM SEVRANCE left the trail before he got within sight of the town of Ridoro. He spurred the big black he bestrode toward the summit of a low hillock at the edge of which he thought he discerned barbed wire fencing. Beyond, somewhere in the hills to the northward he knew lay Sunset Rancho—*Puestas de Sol,* the Mexicans of the vicinity called it.

Gray eyes were set without expression in his darkly sunburned face. Sevrance was riding to vengeance, and the mission was not a happy one. Justice had to be done, and his was the hand.

A voice halted him when he reached the crest of the rise—a cool voice, drawling with challenge.

"Howdy, there, pardner. Where yuh headin' in?"

In that voice there was none of the friendliness of the West that Sevrance knew. And yet, when he turned it was not the words that caused the sudden light in his eyes. He passed the speaker

A BIG
by NORTON

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Jim Severance had his own mission of powdersmoke vengeance in Ridoro—but when a girl who hated him faced double ruin from the wolf pack of Ricoro's gun-law ruler, Jim faced double hell!

NOVEL

L. JAMES

a Trouble Shooter

By the author of "Square-Shooter," "Six-Gun Exile," etc.

by with his calm gaze. Riding up out of the coulée below him was more than the speaker—there was a girl.

She did not look out of place on the rangeland; rather she was subtly, indefinably a part of it. It was the sheer loveliness of her, combined with her cool air of authority that held Sevrance spell-bound for a moment.

Silken shirt of tan, buckskin gloves, her feet encased in boyish boots of soft, tooled leather, bronze and golden hair tucked under a straight-brimmed, wide sombrero—she was the very thing Sevrance had not expected to find on the road to his grim mission. Her cool blue eyes regarded him with a prideful arrogance; and disregarding it, Sevrance

noticed the way that Western suns had but only powdered her clear, flawless skin like dusted gold, leaving it untanned.

It was not she who had spoken. Beside her rode loosely a slender, lanky cowboy, whose wide leather chaps flapped far out from his saddle as he rode. The puncher had steady, interrogating eyes and he spoke with the Texan drawl.

Sevrance saw that they had every intention of coming up to him on the farther side of the wire. So instead of answering, he waited until they approached, his eyes fixed frankly on the girl with a mixture of wonder and curiosity.

The cowboy drew up. "This land ain't takin' on no trespassers these days," he volunteered. "We jest thought we'd let yuh know in time."

Sevrance frowned. "Does that go for both sides of this fence?" he demanded coolly.

The puncher regarded him with a faint trace of respect. For his part, Sevrance noticed with some surprise, the edge of a deputy sheriff's badge half hidden by the open vest of the man confronting him.

"No, but the wire's broke jest below here," the puncher said. "I was jest ridin' down to fix it up."

Sevrance was acutely aware of the suspicion with which they were both regarding him. But he was at a loss to account for it. This girl—where had she come from, and what was the meaning of the frank hostility in her deep blue eyes? Something of sadness lurked in them, too, he thought.

Then he smiled. "These must be bad days for Ridoro," he observed. "Do I look as though I want to set your grass afire—or just what is it?"

"There's more than grass—in Cattle Creek," was the cowpuncher's quick retort. "Yuh might as well know it's no use tryin' to jump claims hereabouts—an' it's all staked!"

SEVRANCE'S eyes flashed for a second. The girl's golden head came up and she faced him.

"These are bad days for Ridoro," she exclaimed. "Among other things, we don't want strangers on this range. We're not keen about strangers here now. You see," she added meaningly, "there are only about two reasons for strangers to be coming to Ridoro lately."

Sevrance waited. It was the girl's companion who finished for her.

"One of 'em is to look for a job on one of the ranches," he said, "an' you don't look much like a hand, amigo."

He was regarding Sevrance's clothes. The girl had already taken in his appearance and it seemed to puzzle her. Certainly he looked like neither one thing nor the other—to be coming to Ridoro at the edge of the gold boom.

Assuredly, as the cowboy had observed, he was not looking for a job as a puncher. He did not look like one. He had on dark riding breeches and soft black boots; and under his light coat of gray he wore a neat shirt, its collar opened at the throat. From the tip of his gray Stetson to his spurred feet, he was immaculate and somehow out of place here. Only the steel of gray, unwavering eyes in a sunburnt and lean face gave Sevrance admission anywhere, and generally without question.

"No," he agreed slowly. "I'm not looking for a job—not on the range, at least. And I won't come on your land if you don't like it. Just what land is it?"

"Sunset Rancho," the cowboy returned. "I'm Sam Borden, the foreman; an' this here's Miss Ferguson, who owns it—now."

Sevrance did not show the surprise

he felt at this announcement. The girl added in her cool, stinging voice—

"And all the gold you've heard about in Ridoro is in Cattle Creek—and Cattle Creek is on my land! The mineral claims have been staked." She hesitated, met Sevrance's eyes; and then she dropped her own gaze as she went on: "There'll be nothing in Ridoro for you, I think, and it's a bad town. Maybe you'd better drift back through the pass."

Sevrance seemed not to have heard her.

"Cattle Creek is on — Sunset Rancho?" he asked slowly.

"Plenty," the foreman said. "And what's more the mineral claims is all staked."

Sevrance's eyes were clouded. He considered rapidly. This girl must be Muriel Ferguson, of whom he had heard. And according to Sam Borden, she was the owner of Sunset Rancho—now. That meant that her father was dead. And suddenly he remembered her brother, known as Red.

He recalled himself quickly. "This town got a sheriff still?" he asked.

The girl's lips drooped. "It did have," she said, "before—things began happening here. He was my brother. He was shot. Right now, Sam Borden's a deputy, and that's—all."

Now Sevrance was commencing to understand. Red Ferguson—sheriff—killed. There were strange things happening in and around Ridoro; he had heard of them only vaguely outside.

This deadly suspicion—the unfriendliness of these two people—it was not the West that Sevrance remembered, even though he had left his own country behind him years since. The girl's frank animosity. He could not resent it so much because he guessed, somehow, that it was mostly defiance.

He picked up his bridle. "I think I'll be trailing in to Ridoro," he said quietly.

"Unless yo're looking for plenty trouble," Sam Borden said, "yuh better stay out."

Severance had turned his mount's head. He looked back over his shoulder and met the deputy's keen eyes.

"I'm going on in," he repeated. "As for the trouble—*quien sabe?*—maybe I am looking for it!"

CHAPTER II

"I'M THE BOSS OF THIS TOWN!"

VERY little news of Ridoro and the Quicapos Valley had drifted to the outside. The town was completely isolated geographically. Yet as he worked his way toward it, Sevrance had been aware of strange disturbing rumors.

Gold had been discovered there, supposedly. Yet after the first rush, few had entered the valley.

Ridoro lay at the edge of the desert that ran between the two huge mountain shoulders north and south. Except across the desert valley, there was only one way of entering the range country; and it had formed a rich principality of its own.

The only entrance was through Mestizo Pass, high in the mountains—so high that in winter the pass was blocked with snow that suffered from none of the heat of the lowland; and during this time the weekly stage service was always suspended. At such times the valley was cut off completely from the outside world.

The snow was due at any time. But Sevrance had not waited for the coach. Alone, in the saddle of the big black, he had pursued his trail in silence.

What awaited him here he could not guess; but he was aware of a sinister,

brooding atmosphere that hung over the Quicapos Valley. Solo Pete, who had found the gold in Cattle Creek, had been killed; he knew that. Red Ferguson, who had been sheriff, had been shot, too.

Sevrance could only guess at what lay behind these facts. From long experience he knew of the dregs of humanity that swirl at the fringes of gold strikes. Ridoro, formerly so open-handed and friendly, headquarters for the wealthy ranchers of the valley, was in the hands of bad men.

It was Sevrance's country—his home, even though he had been years absent from it. He resented the obvious conclusion that he had to draw.

Nevertheless, the prospect of trouble appeared to disturb him not in the slightest. He rode on coolly, calm, and outwardly seemed at peace. His mind dwelt upon the girl who had met him on the trail.

It had been a strange reception. He smiled to himself as he rode.

The smile had a strange effect on Sevrance's lean features. It dissipated instantly the hardness of his keen profile. Until it came, in his immobility, there was something deadly and dangerous about him—a calm that told of so many dangers faced that no horror or danger could possibly impress him now.

He rode around another bend in the trail, past a clump of trees; and then, coming out into the open again, saw Ridoro just ahead of him.

There was little to see. Ridoro consisted of a single main street with one and two-story buildings on either side of its length. That was all.

But there was little left to remind Sevrance of the sleepy, comfortable little cow town which had sprawled so indolently at the base of the foothills, where the purple lower slopes of the mountains, clothed in chaparral and sage, came to mingle with the sands of the white desert that stretched almost to the border.

The gaps between the store fronts along the main street had been filled in—incongruously, for Ridoro had not been built for activity. There was activity, though, and an undercurrent of strained waiting that made itself manifest.

The dusty main street, wide and unpaved, was still the same, except that there were more horses and carts standing outside of more cantinas and bars. And back of the main street there were a few miserable shacks now. Sevrance considered that this was where the poorer element who had been attracted by the news of the strike, must live.

An open wagon, loaded with provisions and pulled by two mettlesome horses, reeled up the street and vanished over the hill beyond the town. Sevrance smiled slightly. That sight, at least, was reminiscent. An intoxicated man stumbled from an open doorway and grasped at the mane of a waiting pony.

WHEN Sevrance got off the trail and put his horse at a walk down the main street, he realized that there was not a woman in sight. In Ridoro's other, peaceful days, the women from the ranches had done their shopping here with all the casual, matter-of-fact air of women in towns in the East. Their absence seemed to take on a meaning.

The sheriff's office was nearer at hand. Sevrance saw that it at least had not been moved. A group of men was gathered outside it clustered around a notice board there. Idly he moved his pony across the street until he could see what attracted their attention.

The men were a rough looking lot. They were not the working kind. None of them came from the ranches. In

Port Said, Kimberly or Nome, their kind could be spotted—the riff-raff that swirls in upon the heels of news of money to be made without the need of work.

Somebody laughed. "Tear that side o' the poster off!" was the cry. "Who needs to know that Ole Sullivan's runnin' for sheriff?"

A grimy hand reached up for the printed sheet. Sevrance had just caught a few words that attracted him:

NOTICE TO ALL CITIZENS:
A Special Election for the Choosing of a Sheriff to Succeed—

That was all he saw. He caught a momentary glimpse of a thin, almost ascetic face, deeply bronzed, with jet-black, boring eyes, in the open doorway of the sheriff's office. He turned away quickly as the whole notice sheet was ripped from the board.

"Steady—I'm readin' that notice, boys!"

Some quality in Sevrance's voice cracked like a whip above the comments of the loungers. Tan bearded faces turned upon him with fierce questioning.

"What the—?"

The man who held the crumpled sheet spat an oath. His bearded jaw shot out and hard, vicious eyes took in every detail of Sevrance's exotic appearance in a flash.

"Who yuh aimin' to order in this town, stranger?"

Sevrance covered him with a swift look. "Nobody in particular. That sheet was put there to read, and I've decided I want to read it. Hand it to me!"

His voice was cold, metallic. His right thumb was stuck in the wide belt he wore; but his pistol, though it bulged out his light gray coat, was not near it.

"Pronto!"

The command was low, but it came with icy directness. The bearded man jerked involuntarily. But it was Sevrance's eyes that held him. He shuffled uncertainly, growled an oath, and spat tobacco juice into the dust. Just then someone in the crowd yelled:

"Make him get it, Carver!"

The man's head jerked up. He had been in the act of raising his hand. An atmosphere of electric intensity caught the crowd and Sevrance knew he was going to have to back his stand. He saw red in the glowering eyes of his man.

But before another word could be spoken, a new voice broke in—a voice almost as cold as Sevrance's own; and Sevrance looked up into the eyes of the tall, frock-coated individual he had seen in the doorway.

"Hand over that notice. Carver—quick!"

The crowd stood still. Sevrance caught its reaction to that commanding voice. Carver's bearded jaw dropped and his belligerence fled him.

"Hell, chief, I didn't think—"

"D'you suppose I had 'em printed for you fools to tear down?" the man cut in contemptuously.

Sevrance held out his hand coolly for the notice; but when the bearded one reached the side of his horse his eyes were vicious and threatening. Sevrance smiled.

"Gracias!" he said. "I'll read it later."

He stuffed the paper into his pocket and turned to the dark man in the doorway with some interest. His eyes were met by cold eyes of piercing black. Lean fingers were occupied with a long cigar. The fingers moved with a little gesture, and the sullen crowd of men began shifting away.

When they were gone, Sevrance faced the lone figure in the doorway.

"Thanks," he smiled ironically. "Seems like you got some influence among these charming citizens."

THE dark man shot him a swift look and stepped calmly from the doorway, until he stood at the black's head, staring searchingly into Sevrance's cool eyes.

"Maybe I have," he agreed, in an even, toneless voice. "They look like a bad lot; but I don't reckon you need to be afraid of any of 'em."

"I'm not."

The dark eyes under the brim of the black Stetson narrowed and bored more insistently. Finally the man nodded.

"I saw that. My name's McQuirg."

"Sevrance, I'm a stranger here. Are you the sheriff now?"

"No. That's because I don't want to be. I'm head of the citizen's committee of Ridoro until a sheriff's been elected. The old one—died." He waited.

Sevrance nodded. Smilingly faintly, he jerked his head in the direction that the loungers had taken at McQuirg's dismissal. "And those hombres—are they the citizens?"

McQuirg shot him another quick suspicious look. There was irony underneath every word that Sevrance spoke. The dark features hardened imperceptibly.

"They're some of the citizens," was the brief acknowledgment. "A town's always made up of all kinds — especially a boom town, which Ridoro is right now. You're a stranger here—" McQuirg met Sevrance's eyes again meaningly—"Circulate a bit and find out who McQuirg is. Then come back and see me. I can find room for you in this town. After the gold?"

"Gold had something to do with my coming," Sevrance answered quietly.

"Well, there ain't none. Cattle Creek's all staked." McQuirg smiled.

"Then why are you—and the rest, staying on here?" Sevrance demanded.

Again the meaning smile. "I got here—that's all. I'll get the gold. And after that—" McQuirg's eyes swept the green slopes beyond the town—"this'd be a nice valley to be sorta boss of, wouldn't it?"

Sevrance agreed, and picked up his reins idly. He had given no indication of whether he knew what McQuirg meant.

"Come back and see me," the latter repeated. "Find out who I am first. But"—he hesitated—"I'd advise you to get that gun where y' can get at it faster."

Sevrance gave one of his smiles that was not entirely a smile, and turned away.

"I've used it before, *amigo,*" he said over his shoulder. "It isn't hard to get to—when I want it!"

And before the other could reply, he was trotting off down the street. McQuirg stood looking after him with a puzzled frown in his enigmatic, stony eyes.

CHAPTER III

"Don't Draw That Gun!"

SEVRANCE had no definite goal in mind. He had found Ridoro a lot different from what he had expected. Yet it should have had no effect upon him. He had a mission here, and he would fulfill it. Good or bad, Ridoro was only the scene of an act of Justice.

At least it should have been. But he was surprised to find himself concerned over what he had come into contact with. After all, this was his town—his home, and it had fallen under the rule of thieves and ruffians.

They would not tolerate him long unless he took up with them. McQuirg was not the type to allow another character as strong as himself to exist without an alliance. Sevrance knew he would hear more of the boss, later.

Meantime, he had to find some excuse for staying on here. He would be watched; his every move would be supervised, he knew.

The men who had been in the group before the sheriff's office stood in a surly knot just inside a big barroom in a new edifice of two stories, farther down the street. Sevrance regarded the place thoughtfully.

Inside the big, balconied barroom were a number of gaming tables; and one or two women sat about also. He glanced up at the legend painted on the new boarding outside:

McQUIRG'S
BIG HORN PALACE

It told enough. A honky tonk! This was the type of McQuirg's contribution to Ridoro. The size of the place was revealing, too—the Palace was the biggest building in town. If Sevrance had held any doubt as to who the real boss of Ridoro was, it was gone.

He noted the brand marks on the horses in front of the hitching racks as he passed. There was none he remembered. None of the ranchers appeared to be in town.

The fact was revealing too. Ridoro had been solely a ranch town. Now the men from the ranches were keeping quietly behind their own barbed wires.

Sevrance caught sight of just one sign he recognized—Joe Anderson's old shack. It looked forlorn and pushed aside against the creaking newness of the changed order. But old Joe, apparently, was still postmaster, and general storekeeper and outfitter as well.

Across from his place was another building, not so new as the rest, more grim-faced and retiring. Sevrance studied the sign. It read:

THE SQUARE DEAL

"Gambling—and maybe a couple of rooms to rent," muttered Sevrance. "Yet there's something about those words," he added grimly to himself, "which is not too much associated with Brother McQuirg!"

He slipped from his mount and entered the open doorway.

The interior of The Square Deal, like its outside, was far less imposing than the Palace. There were no loungers at the long bar, and the tables all appeared to be empty. It was inviting, however. Sevrance blinked to accustom his eyes to the shadows—when he was arrested by a calm voice at the left of him.

"Lookin' for somebody, pardner?"

TURNING, he found himself looking at a tall, thin individual who was clothed almost entirely in black—even to a black string tie—just arising from behind one of the tables pushed along the wall. Cards were laid out in solitaire formation in front of him, and on the instant Sevrance knew that this man was a gambler.

"I'm looking for the owner of this place," he replied easily.

His interrogator's dark eyes surveyed him with the same quiet interest he was showing. Sevrance noted the calm steadiness of those eyes. They were set in an untanned, smooth face, over a finely chiselled, aquiline nose and a slender mustache.

"I'm him. Stephen Duryea Vallance—S. D. Vallance o' Monterey. Down there the 'S. D' stands for 'Square Deal.' "

There was something belligerent in the last statement, as though, behind the mask of the gambler's frozen fea-

tures, he was challenging Sevrance to doubt its truth.

"But I've never been in Monterey," Sevrance returned easily. "Do they recognize the initials in this town?"

The gambler's eyes narrowed, and he surveyed Sevrance carefully before he replied.

"There ain't been anybody doubtin' 'em yet," he said. "At least, not out loud."

Sevrance nodded as though the subject no longer interested him. He turned to the bar, aware of the intent scrutiny of the other man.

"Have a drink?" he murmured.

S. D. Vallance poured two glasses full quietly. The drinks were tossed off swiftly. Vallance waited.

"I'm looking for a job," Sevrance announced.

"Yeuh? You'd better try the ranches hereabouts. There ain't no work in Ridoro." Vallance paused; then he spat out, "No work. Only hell!"

"So I gathered. That's why I want a job here."

"Yo're mighty hopeful, amigo," the gambler returned. "Just where are yuh aimin' to get this job?"

"Right here!" Sevrance looked up quickly. "I'm going to get a job in the Square Deal!"

The owner stared at him and made no attempt to conceal his surprise.

"It won't matter just what kind of a job it is," Sevrance went on quietly. "I've got an idea, though, that in a town like this you might want somebody around in an emergency sometimes—especially if you're running cards and a wheel. I might be handy that way."

Vallance frowned. He was about to speak when his glance went beyond Sevrance and took in an individual standing in the open doorway. The look in his eyes warned Sevrance, who flickered a sharp glance into the fly-specked glass behind the bar. He recognized one of the men who had been present at the recent scene outside the sheriff's office.

He did not move. The man came lurching rather heavily into the barroom, making for a spot near the stranger. Sevrance let his right hand rest casually on the bar rail; but it was nowhere near where a bulge in his coat marked a gun in a holster at his hip.

"Howdy," came a grunt from beside him; but the remark was addressed to Vallance. "Gimme some pizen. I hear they's a stranger in town."

Sevrance turned quietly. "You're standing alongside him," he said calmly. "Didn't you know it?"

There was a faint contempt in his voice; and for all his hulking clumsiness the man sensed it. He ran a hand cautiously over his stubble of beard and regarded Sevrance through red-rimmed, ugly eyes.

"S'pose I did," he drawled. "If yo're the stranger, I reckon yuh won't be here long, will yuh? This here ain't no healthy town for strangers, they tell me."

Sevrance had no doubt of the meaning of this. McQuirg was making sure of his man, that was all. This was bait. It would be a lot easier if Sevrance could be made to leave town. Something about his aloofness had warned the boss that he had come here on no ordinary business.

"I like the climate," Sevrance returned easily. "There's only one thing about Ridoro I don't like. There's too many questions asked by hombres who are too—damned—inquisitive!"

The gunman's eyes flamed. He took a quick look at the outlines of Sevrance's gun. His hands dropped nervously; but as yet he made no move to reach his own. Vallance drew back behind the bar and with head lowered, waited.

"Meanin' present company?" purred the bully.

"You've guessed it. Don't reach for that gun—you'll need it later!"

Sevrance's command came like the crack of a whip. Knowing what he was up against, he knew every move and every line that was to come, in advance. So he decided to anticipate the issue.

Even as he spoke, his interrogator moved. But Sevrance was before him, and his move was startling.

He made no effort to reach for his gun, which in its awkward position would have been fatal. Instead, his right fist came up from nowhere. It had connected even before the other man had touched his pistol butt.

There was a surprised, choked grunt —a mighty crack. As the gunman sagged, Sevrance's left fist crossed and his man dropped backward, crashing into a high stool behind him and coming down to the floor in a heap.

VALLANCE saw the two blows—and he saw something else, too. In Sevrance's hand, even as he struck the second time, a pistol had appeared miraculously from nowhere. It whipped out from under Sevrance's coat lapel—and the bulge at his hip was still there.

His victim sat up, stunned and dizzy, and found himself gazing into the mouth of a long black forty-five.

"Up!" commanded Sevrance between his teeth. "Up—and out—pronto! And tell your boss to send somebody else who talks less and draws faster. *Vamos!*"

Still dazed, the gunman scrambled to his feet unsteadily, stared incredulously at the stranger, and then, without a word, weaved toward the door and went out. Coolly Sevrance slipped the gun back under his coat and turned to the gambler, who had watched every move.

"I think McQuirg'll be offering me work with him—now," he said calmly. "Unless he's got another real bad man hidden away somewhere."

"He has—but he won't send him—yet."

Vallance studied Sevrance for a long time without saying more. Sevrance knew he had guessed rightly; it took no words to verify his first supposition—that Vallance was not to be numbered among McQuirg's crowd. Possibly he was not aligned against McQuirg, either. But there was something about the man's bearing which said he was nobody's tool. And those who were with McQuirg were tools, nothing less.

"You think y' could handle trouble in this place—if it happened to come?" Vallance asked at last, softly.

Smiling, Sevrance shook his head. "It won't matter what I think," he retorted. "What's your opinion?"

The calm challenge reached its mark. Vallance was not the man to smile. He only nodded briefly.

"Yo're hired," he said. Then, with a swift glance at Sevrance's clothes, "You don't need no money; but I'm not asking questions. There's a lot of gambling in here—boozin', too. I'll fix up a percentage with you on net receipts. Fair enough?"

"Perfect."

Vallance nodded. With narrowed eyes, then, he gave his parting admonition; he seemed to sense Sevrance's purpose. "But any fightin' in this place—is business, savvy?" Private fights take place outside!"

Sevrance nodded. "Got any duds?"

"Only my blanket roll. There's a little trunk comin' in on the stage tomorrow," he said.

"The stage line won't be runnin' long. Mestizo Pass'll be blocked with snow before the week's up. I guess yuh know that if y' stay here awhile, the only way of gettin' out o' Ridoro'll be across the desert an' the long trail south."

"So I've heard." Sevrance considered "I expect to stick around awhile,

though; and if I want to get out bad enough the southern route'll do." He hesitated, moving to the doorway. "I'm going to take a look along Cattle Creek. Is it all staked?"

"Staked? Plenty. It's on Sunset Rancho, an' all the mineral rights was staked out by the Fergusons and their friends that time o' the false alarm gold boom ten years ago. But everybody forgot about it till old Solo Pete found gold there, a month and a half back."

"And then what?" Severance's voice was soft.

"Then he looked it up to see if he had claim to his discovery. He'd been prospectin' in these parts all his life and he never struck a thing. When he did, he found it belonged to somebody else." Vallance shook his head.

"So he gave it up?"

"He would've." Vallance's eyes shone. "But the Fergusons wouldn't let him. They offered to take a fifth share and let him work it. That was Red—an' Miss Muriel."

"So that's it!" Sevrance smiled a little; for a moment the hardness in his eyes was gone. "White of 'em, I'd say. And then—by the way, Vallance, do they know who killed Solo Pete?"

"Red Ferguson knew. Solo Pete was killed in his creek, knee deep in water, an' Red found out who did it. Swore he'd arrest the man—an' then they drilled Red through the back before he could talk."

"No one else knew?"

Vallance gave a scornful laugh. "Lots know—but it's the death sign to tell. Oh, it ain't no mystery, stranger, that Pete was killed by one o' McQuirg's men. But y' can't hang twenty men or so, and besides—McQuirg is the law in Ridoro right now."

Sevrance said no more. But seeing his face, Vallance called after him as he went out:

"Yuh'd better remember that! Buckin' him ain't gonna improve your health none!"

CHAPTER IV

Stuffed Ballot-boxes

SEVRANCE considered that he had learned considerable. Ridoro was going to be no healthy place for him; but he had work to do there. He was ranging up opposite McQuirg, and he did not need Vallance's admonition to know that such was not healthy.

McQuirg intended to rule Ridoro and the lonely valley—that was the game. But the methods he would have to employ to gain control were not pleasant to think on.

Sevrance hesitated at the foot of the cracked and warped board steps which led to the narrow porch that surrounded Joe Anderson's store. The afternoon was waning, and the sun had almost reached the tips of the lower crags westward.

The last rays were diffusing a shimmer of crimson and gold upon the mighty peaks that hemmed Ridoro in; and higher up, where the mightier crags towered, they painted snow strips with henna and mauve and golden red. The lower slopes were purple, already becoming wrapped in shadows.

This was Sevrance's return to the West which had bred him, and he wondered vaguely why he had ever left it. The might and majesty of its far spaces impressed themselves upon him. In the hush of approaching twilight, Ridoro was quiet, and he could fancy the valley to be as he had known it once. He found himself wondering if there was room among all this beauty for the havoc and fury of men and hate and vengeance.

It wasn't exactly an answer; but a

voice from beyond the open door of Anderson's place fell on his ears at just that moment. It was Joe's voice, wrinkled, somehow, and like his face, gentle:

"After 'bout thirty years o' lookin' for it, Old Pete was like a kid—it was the end o' his rainbow, when he found that gold. An' right on top of it, they had to go an' plug him. Sullivan, it wasn't fair—an' I'm tellin' yuh, I'd 'a' let 'em plug me first if I could. Jest so's old Pete could 'a' played with his toy for awhile after he found it. Him lookin' for it so long."

The voice trailed ff, but Sevrance's face was suddenly hard and dangerous again. There were graven lines about his mouth, lines that made him seem older than his thirty-one years. In his eyes was a pain, too, that added to the toll.

He went inside slowly.

Anderson was lighting a lamp at the farther end of the storeroom when he entered. There was one man standing at the counter absently filling a corncob pipe. He did not look up at once. His lips, under a bristling, iron-gray mustache were slightly parted as though he was about to speak after deliberation.

Sevrance, moving over to where a glass case displayed a variety of pistol and big game ammunition, was the object of a swift look from under bushy gray eyebrows as he passed.

He noticed that the man was a good deal older than he—perhaps fifty or more, but hale and strong, with a heavy, powerful physique and the rugged outlines of a man who has spent his whole life in the open. He was plainly a cattleman—the first Sevrance had seen that day.

Joe Anderson looked up inquisitively and moved his almost useless glasses. "Evenin'," he vouchsafed tentatively.

Sevrance replied curtly, glancing over his shoulder to see that the other man was out of earshot. "I think I just heard you talking about Solo Pete," he said quietly. "You knew him?"

"Yeuh." Anderson regarded him doubtfully. "That is, most everybody hereabouts knew him—"

"But you knew him well," Sevrance persisted. "He died—suddenly?"

"Kinda! They drilled him two places, an' one was his heart. He went 'thout a peep."

"But before that—?" Sevrance's voice was softer now. "I wanted to know if he left a message for—for anybody before he died. He and you were friends I think, Mr. Anderson. You knew him better than most when he'd strike these parts. Did he leave any word for—for anyone?"

ANDERSON'S look was frankly suspicious now. "Not that he did; s'posin' he had? What business'd it be o' yores, stranger?"

"None," Sevrance replied quietly, "unless the message was for me. You wouldn't remember me; I was too young. But—"

"Jumpin' horse thieves!" Anderson peered forward and jerked off his glasses with excitement. "Don't tell me yo're—?"

"His son, yes." Sevrance's voice was very low. "Jim Sevrance."

Anderson put out his hand and Sevrance accepted it without a change of feature. "Yuh been away a long time, son," the storekeeper said. "Reckon old Pete missed yuh. But he kep' sayin' yuh'd be back with a bagfull o' gold."

"Yes. It was hard to get back. I've been in Africa—Kimberly—mining." The gaps between the jerky words barely suggested the story of the lean, hardfought years they skipped. "I came back once, not long agin, but nobody knew it."

Joe Anderson was regarding him with grave eyes in which pity and curiosity

were mingled. But there was as yet no expression on Sevrance's face.

"Did he leave anything, Joe?" he repeated.

Anderson had to swallow hard. "Only his six-shooter, son. Tol' me once that if anything happened to him I should pass it on to yuh. That, an'—he said he wished he could see yuh, jes' before—before they got him. He wanted to let yuh know how happy he was, since he'd struck the 'pay'."

Sevrance's eyes lighted slightly and his hard features softened. Anderson poked around in an old drawer. At length he turned with a forty-five encased in a worn holster slung from a cartridge belt of thick leather, which he extended to Sevrance.

"That is her. Still loaded. He didn't have no chanc't, shoot back, I reckon. But it's a good gun. Pete's killed more'n rattlesnakes with her in his time."

"It's likely to kill rattlesnakes—yet," Sevrance said softly. He let his hands run softly over the creased leather of the holster. Anderson watched him. "And the shootin' Joe," he said quietly. "Know anything about that?"

"No more'n anybody." Anderson shook his grizzled head mournfully. "Days ain't what they was in Ridoro, son. Since Pete struck that pay dirt, things've changed. McQuirg came—and his crowd. Others, too, who didn't know McQuirg, but they soon learned. Pete died because he'd found the only gold in Ridoro, an' those hombres hadn't come all this way for nothin'."

Sevrance might not have heard. He was studying the scarred leather holster. He did not see the powerful rancher behind him regarding his sloping shoulders. The man's eyes met Anderson's, and the old storekeeper straightened.

"Hell—yes," he muttered. "Jim, are yuh lettin' yoreself be known in Ridoro?"

"Not yet. I've got a job here, and I'll never find out what I want to know once they know who I am. Nobody knew Pete's last name, though."

"No." Anderson lowered his voice. "But I'd like to have yuh know old man Sullivan, though, under yore right colors. Remember him—owner o' the Z-Bar-Z."

Sevrance turned and his eyes met the rancher's. It was a steady look he received, albeit one of curiosity, which was not strange in the present state of things in Ridoro. He knew Sullivan. The cowman was one of the oldest ranchers in the vicinity, solid and square. He was a holdover from the days when the West was young.

Sevrance considered and then gave a quick nod. "All right," he agreed. "But it's to go no further."

Sullivan was regarding him closely when he came up with Anderson. "So that's who yuh are!" was his greeting.

"Solo Pete was my friend." Simply he stuck out his hand and Sevrance accepted it.

"No need to ask why yo're here, then, I s'pose?" Sullivan said meaningly. "Are yuh linin' up—for or against McQuirg and his gang?"

SEVRANCE shook his head. "I never line up when there's sides," he returned quietly. "I like to move alone—like my father." He pulled from his pocket the notice of election he had managed to secure.

Sullivan smiled. "That's today's joke for Ridoro," he said. "Yuh'll notice I'm on there—runnin' against Henderson for sheriff."

Sevrance asked, "Who's Henderson? I'd have thought McQuirg—"

"Not by a long shot! McQuirg keeps in the background. He wouldn't have such a free hand if he was sheriff, so he's givin' the job to his chief gunfighter."

"Then Henderson's one of McQuirg's men?"

"Exactly. Election's the night after next. I can figure my votes right down. There'll be about twenty-eight—includin' my own. There's no ethics involved." he added grimly. "And that count is only if they let our men vote!"

"But the other men here!" Sevrance persisted. "McQuirg didn't bring an army with him, did he? How does he manage to control the whole town?"

"McQuirg only had about ten men in his gang when he got here." Sullivan agreed. "But as the rest drifted in, they managed to get 'em under control. At best, the newcomers are a hard lot, and I guess they were willing enough to come under McQuirg's protection once they saw the lay o' the land."

"It ain't easy to get outa here, yuh see," Joe Anderson put in, "an', when they got here, they found there was no gold to be had except Cattle Creek. An' ol' man Ferguson had staked the mineral rights there years ago, when we had our first gold scare—the one that petered out. So the drifters jest joined up with McQuirg on the chance o' gettin' in on something else."

"Something else?"

Sullivan tapped out his pipe. "They'll get the gold, son, even if there ain't enough for all. And they'll get more, if they have their way. McQuirg's bought a ranch and he's already registered a brand—an' his stock all comes from the old ranches in the valley. Once Henderson's sheriff, who's gonna stop the rustlin'? Who's gonna stop anything—till McQuirg's drained the Quicapos range dry and owns it all?"

There was stark tragedy in the quiet words. Sullivan and the old ranchers of the valley were seeing their whole world being swept away and they seemed powerless to save themselves.

"Red Ferguson was shot for two reasons," Sullivan went on gravely. "One of 'em was that he knew who killed yore ol' man. The second was, he an' his sister owned Sunset Rancho, the richest in the valley, even if the gold wasn't there!"

Sevrance had a swift vision of Muriel Ferguson, as he had seen her on that day. He remembered the sorrow in her eyes, and the courage of her helpless defiance. He understood now what he had merely guessed at then.

Solo Pete and Red Ferguson had stood in the way of McQuirg. Now Muriel was in his way.

Sevrance's eyes were hard. She hadn't seemed to like him, but that did not matter. He knew that he had two missions in Ridoro now.

She was helpless, alone. And he had no one—no tie in the world. No purpose, he recalled, beyond avenging his father.

It was a danger that a day before he would have discounted. After years in Africa—years of wandering and fighting in far-off savage places, he had returned to regard his own land as devoid of thrills or danger. But he could see the awful things that this lone girl had to face, and he recalled the game defiance with which she had greeted him.

He would stay, he decided. He was in.

"O' course, McQuirg'll be sorta careful, till after Henderson's elected." Sullivan's voice seemed to take up his thoughts. "He'll have to be. Afterwards—he'll start. Anything'll go in Ridoro, an' to fight back'll be to fight the law! Sevrance, this town is gonna split wide open, and them that ain't with McQuirg are goin' to follow Pete and Red Ferguson—unless they make Mestizo Pass first!"

Sevrance understood—it was a plain warning.

"Mestizo Pass'll be closed to travel pretty soon," he said thoughtfully. "I'm stayin' on, I think—alone," he added.

"Fair enough," Sullivan grunted. Then, as an afterthought, "There's a meetin' of the ranchers out to my place tonight. If yuh get the chance, drop in."

"I may," Sevrance agreed, and started for the door. "But don't forget—no names!"

CHAPTER V

"I'm Taking No Orders"

PLAY was light and drinking was lighter on that first night Sevrance was at the Square Deal. A few men drifted in from the Big Horn Palace, looked him over rather carefully, and then drifted out again. Later on, two punchers strolled through the door, after having become bored with the possibilities of the combined pool room and barber shop farther up the street. But it was a quiet night.

Vallance stood aloof in a corner, chewing at a cigar and idly watching the scene. Sevrance came up to him.

"If it's going to say like this, I'm going to run out for a while," Sevrance announced.

"Yeuh?" Vallance gave him a curious look. "Where—? But never mind; I'm gettin' too curious lately."

"I don't mind telling you," Sevrance retorted. "I'm going to see what's happening out at the Z-Bar-Z. Sullivan invited me to drop in."

"So that's it!" Vallance's hard mouth twisted in a sneer. "Maybe yuh like talkin'—there'll be plenty of it. And that's about all." He gave a short grunt. "They'll probably make out a petition askin' McQuirg to leave town!"

Sevrance looked hard at him. "What does that mean?"

"Just that." Vallance turned to face his new employe. "Those fellers are gettin' old, Sevrance—old an' cautious. Take old Sullivan himself. Twenty years ago, he'd 'a' got his men together if someone like McQuirg showed up, and rode 'im right outa town. But no—he's got a family now, him an' the rest. Family and property. They know McQuirg an' them can't exist in the same valley—McQuirg means extermination for 'em. Hell! Family an' property might not make cowards o' brave men, Sevrance; but if it wasn't for them things, McQuirg wouldn't have the grip he's got in Ridoro!"

Sevrance nodded thoughtfully. He had never considered it, but Vallance had struck at the root of things. Family and property— The Sullivan he had heard tales of, in the old days, would have done just as Vallance said. So would the others. Minority or not, they'd have fought for their valley and its integrity, mostly on general principles.

And now—no, they were not afraid, perhaps. But deep inside him Sevrance knew the reason for his refusal to join with them. Playing the lone hand he always did, he counted only on himself. It was useless to try to make an aggressive fighting unit out of the men in this valley.

Useless—until they were pushed too far!

"You're right, I guess,' he agreed; "but I think I'll ride out, anyway. I wonder—do you suppose anyone from Sunset is likely to be there?"

The look in Vallance's brooding eyes was suddenly flaming with hostility.

"Sunset?" he repeated "What do you know about Sunset?"

"I think I met the owner on the trail today. Why?"

"Plenty!" Vallance removed the cigar from between his teeth and his hard jaw shot out. "Maybe I begin to savvy why yo're stayin' on in Ridoro.

If it's Miss Ferguson, Sevrance—take the trail through the pass—right now!"

Sevrance's features hardened. "Is that an order?" he asked coldly.

"Maybe it's just damn' good advice!" Vallance shot back. "Miss Ferguson ain't goin' to be annoyed by no driftin' hombres in this town — not while I can help it. Cattle Creek belongs to her—savvy?"

"So that's it!" Sevrance smiled coolly. "I'm stayin' on, Vallance. And Miss Ferguson can keep Cattle Creek as long as she likes. If I annoy her, ever—maybe she'll come and tell you about it. Until then—" the flickering amber light flamed for a moment in the depths of his hard eyes — "until then, Vallance, limit any orders you've got for me—to business!"

HE turned carelessly, with catlike, soft-moving grace that was a part of his steely slenderness, and went out. The gambler's fierce eyes bored into his back.

He knew he would be late for the palaver at Sullivan's house, but he did not particularly care. He had no intention of lining up with the ranchmen of the valley. But he did want to know them. Also—though he had not admitted it to himself until then—he wanted to see Muriel Ferguson again.

As he rode on alone through the star-littered night, her face seemed to dance before his vision. Angry and unfriendly, brave and thrilling with defiance.

He knew what she was facing now. He might be facing it, too—though she might not know it at once. Sevrance liked a lone game. Already he knew his life to be endangered.

McQuirg and he had been enemies from their first look into each other's eyes. It was a more deeply rooted enmity, too, than any Sevrance might have had with the gunfighters among whom McQuirg had intervened for him.

The unofficial boss of Ridoro had mighty plans, and he had recognized in Sevrance an enemy, a natural enemy to his own kind. Once he had tried to kill him. Now he would try to number him among his own men—while it was diplomatic to do so. Even now, if he so much as guessed at Sevrance's mission in Ridoro, or knew of the relationship between him and the dead prospector, he would strike.

For the moment he was puzzled. There were big things he wanted, and Sevrance was in his way. That was inevitably so, since Sevrance was not enlisted with him. Nor would he be bullied like the ranchers were.

Each man knew without its being voiced, that one or the other of them could not survive in Ridoro. And for the present, McQuirg was the stronger.

Even if there were nothing else, thought Sevrance, there was Muriel Ferguson. For McQuirg to survive meant tragedy for her—stark tragedy which he did not even like to think upon.

She was the center of all this. The owner of Sunset had always taken the leadership in the valley, and she was sticking to her place. Other women would have escaped—sold the ranch and the mineral rights at the best price, and gone away. But that was not for her. This was her country and her place, and she was staying to fight for it.

Sevrance, as he rode, found that his interest in her threatened to overcloud even the driving thought of vengeance which had brought him across Mestizo Pass at the news of his father's murder. He thought of the gallant, defiant figure she had made that day, of the slim, boyish loveliness of her with her back to the wall; and his pulse pounded fiercely. He wondered how any of these men could be squabbling over the gold in Cattle Creek when confronted

with the gold of her hair and the mystery of her blue, childlike eyes.

"Gold of Sunset—sunset gold," he murmured to himself. Then, accusing himself of sentiment for the first time in his life, he flipped his quirt on the black's flank and came into a gallop that soon brought him across a hog-back ridge—the last before the lights of the Z-Bar-Z ranch house came into view.

They glimmered faintly, comfortably, in the bowl of a lesser valley.

CHAPTER VI

"With Us or Against Us?"

THERE were twelve men gathered in the huge, trophy-littered room at the ranch house where Sullivan received his guests, when Sevrance arrived. A big fire blazed in a great fireplace, for the evening air had begun to take on a chill.

The men were all past middle age—twelve silent, rather strained faces marked with the brand of the open; Sullivan himself—and Muriel. She was there, too, and beside her, slightly in the background, sat Sam Borden, her foreman.

Sullivan, grave-faced and courteous, met Sevrance at the door and brought him in with a quick introduction to the circle. Sevrance noted that they all regarded him with an odd mixture of suspicion and hopefulness. He thought the girl's clear eyes searched his face, though, in what was a challenge, and he recalled the scene of the morning.

"Election takes place in two days—we're discussin' that," Sullivan explained, when Sevrance had taken a chair drawn up close to the big stone fireplace. "Miss Ferguson says she's gonna be at the polling place," he added.

"Why?" demanded Sevrance quickly.

"Because I like to back up every stand I take," Muriel Ferguson retorted readily. There was frank hostility in her voice. "Sam Borden is the only officer of the law in Ridoro right now, and he stands for my brother. Until there's a new sheriff elected, Sunset is going to be represented—whether it counts for anything or not."

Sevrance drew down his right eyebrow without comment and sank back in his chair. There was a moment of silence, and he knew the others were waiting for him to speak. He was a newcomer and though they were not entirely trustful of him, they wanted—for that very reason, perhaps—to hear his opinions.

But he had none. To him, the girl's intent had come as a surprise, and it looked like sheer folly. Sam Borden had nothing to do with it, of course. He could understand it; but it was a futile gesture. Muriel was taking her place, at the head of the ranch and the family which had always taken the leadership in the valley. It was sheer defiance, this gesture—defiance forced by knowledge of the fact that the slightest sign of weakening in the face of her enemies would mean disaster.

But it would mean disaster anyway, Sevrance thought. He knew the futility of trying to impress her, though.

Anyway, he had come to the meeting only as a witness. He wanted to know the men who represented the decent element of Ridoro. He had no intention of joining them, no matter what they did, when though their aims might be one with his. Thus he felt he had to right to a voice in their councils.

Sullivan, understanding his silence, spoke up. "The principle's fine, Muriel—but it won't work out. If we could gain anything by what yo're goin' to do, I'd be right behind yuh. So would the rest of us. But if McQuirg's expectin'

yuh down there when the votes are goin' in—it'll mean trouble!"

That's exactly it, Uncle Dan," the girl put in. "McQuirg expects me there. I said I'd be there—and if I'm not it'll be backing down. I shan't do that." She stood up; and Sevrance, in the shadows, thought of what a vivid, youthful picture of courage she was. "Why, with a few men behind us, Sam and I could actually make sure that election was straight!"

"But what if it was straight?" one of the cattlemen intervened. "They don't need t' stuff the ballot box much. McQuirg's got enough men buffaloed so that our votes won't mean a d—a dog-goned thing!"

Sevrance smiled at the hubhub of talk that followed on the heels of this. Through it, he sat watching the girl. She had sat down again and her gray eyes strayed impatiently from one to another of the men. He understood her feelings. Game, she was—game clear through.

IT was going to mean real trouble, that gesture she planned. Already he considered himself in it. There was shooting in the offing, shooting and real danger. In his mind, he was already blocking out McQuirg's moves.

But these others—he could not blame them. They had too much at stake to risk everything—their lives, even, in encouraging the girl's wild plan. Perhaps even the principle of it was beyond them.

The strident voice of a tall, middle-aged rancher with a long nose and sparse gray hair broke in on Sevrance's speculations. He looked up.

"It won't matter whatever we say here! What I'd like t' know is, who can we count on against McQuirg an' his gang, when the time comes. Not tonight, nor tomorrer—nor election night—but whenever the showdown comes. Them that ain't with us are agin us; an' I reckon it's about time we all know who's with us!"

There was a murmur of approval and a few quick shouts of—

"I'm in!" "We all know our gang!" "Count on me an' the two hands I got left."

Suddenly Sevrance was aware that they were all, even the girl, turning to him. He glimpsed in the same second suspicion, hope, hostility, in the eyes that fixed him against the wall. Sullivan shook his head with annoyance.

"Mister Sevrance is a neutral," he interposed. "I invited him here tonight; but this here ain't his quarrel an' he don't have to be dragged in it."

"Yeuh—but where does he stand?" queried the tall individual who had started the subject.

Several voices echoed him. The hostility of the bronzed faces deepened. Sevrance never knew what it was that made him look toward Muriel Ferguson but when he did he saw her red lips twisted with scorn. She did not speak—only looked at him. Behind her, Sam Borden slumped silently in his chair.

Stung by something in the girl's attitude, Sevrance gained his feet abruptly. There was instant quiet. "You want to know where I stand?" he said clearly. "I suppose the question's fair. The fact is—I stand alone. I've got used to it. Not with you or against, but minding my own affairs. If my business is the same as yours, I'm with you,—that is, if I think it's any use. And if it's opposite yours—I'm against you. That's all!"

He swept the astonished faces with fierce eyes. Something in his demeanor held them quiet. Then he took a step backward and gave a brief little bow.

"If that's all you want to know, gentlemen—goodnight!"

He was gone. A stunned silence fol-

lowed him, until the tall cowman who had brought on the scene voiced the feelings of them all.

"Well I'm damned! Where'd yuh pick up a cool hombre like that, Dan?"

Sullivan looked angry. "If I wasn't able to vouch for him I wouldn't 'a' brought him here," he said. "You had no business askin' those questions of a stranger an' I reckon he answered yuh just like yuh deserved. As it was, yuh was lucky. From what I know an' think o' that *caballero,* askin' him questions he don't like is somethin' like lightin' matches around a keg o' nitro!"

Only Muriel Ferguson appeared to question that. In the silence that followed she shook her head.

"I don't agree with you, Uncle Dan," she declared vehemently, "I think he's afraid of his own precious skin and that's keeping him out of anything that looks like trouble!"

While Sam Borden, who, with his employer, had looked into Sevrance's eyes earlier that day, could only stare at her with mute surprise.

CHAPTER VII

"He's Gotta Be Got!"

VALLANCE was seated at his solitaire when Sevrance was coming through the bar for the first time the following day. But the gambler looked up and fixed him with his stony and yet curious stare when Sevrance would have passed with only a nod.

He halted, wondering if he was to hear more on their discussion of the night before. He had wondered several times at his employer's vehemence upon the subject of Muriel Ferguson.

But Vallance had not that in mind. "Maybe I ain't curious, but I'd like to know just what yo're up to in this here town," he permitted himself.

Sevrance smiled a little. "What now?" he queried.

"Yuh've got McQuirg worried. If yuh didn't, he wouldn't be so anxious t' get yuh. They was three bad hombres in here lookin' for yuh hard last night after yuh'd gone."

"Three?"

"Yeuh. It's his way o' handin' out a compliment, I guess," Vallance said dryly. "They allowed they was strangers an' tried to plant the fact that they had nothin' to do with McQuirg, but they didn't fool anybody. They was after you!"

"Have you any idea why?" Sevrance asked coolly.

"No. How about you?"

"Maybe," drawled Sevrance, rolling a cigarette, "Mr. McQuirg objects to my face. I don't know any other reason."

"I don't reckon it's yore face so much as it is that yore face happens to be in Ridoro at the wrong time," Vallance allowed himself. He shrugged and picked up his cards, shuffling them idly. "Whatever it is, he's after yuh. Keep that in mind. I reckon the best thing yuh can do is line up with him. If he don't know much about yuh he suspects a lot!"

Sevrance nodded. "Thanks for the information," he murmured, and went out.

Vallance watched his confident shoulders swing through the doorway. He had not mentioned Muriel Ferguson or the Sunset Ranch; but there was a little hungry gleam in his eyes as they followed the straight figure of Sevrance.

Joe Anderson's helper, a youth of twenty, was in the store when Sevrance entered it. The old man gave a nod of greeting and even allowed his wizened features to relax in a smile when he saw

his visitor.

"I want you to ride with me, Joe," Sevrance said. "Get your pony. I'd like to look over Cattle Creek and see just where it—happened."

Anderson agreed. "Right with yuh, son. I ain't been there since, but I remember there was stakes in the ground where he put up his tent. He worked right down that stream from up where it leaves the foothills," he went on, drawing off his overalls and reaching for a battered Stetson.

"I know." Sevrance was toying with the quirt slung from his wrist. He wore the old gun which Solo Pete had caried.

"You know?" Anderson repeated. "How'd you know?"

Sevrance looked up with a start. "Did I say that? I simply meant it was logical he would have worked that way."

"Yeuh." The storekeeper led the way outside. It took him but a moment to saddle; and Sevrance led his own mount out from the stables behind the Square Deal. The two were soon cantering up the street back toward the trail from which Sevrance had emerged into Ridoro.

When he had met Muriel Ferguson the day before, his intent had been the same as today's. He was more than curious to see with his own eyes just where and how his father had been shot.

The door to the sheriff's office was open as usual. There was a new notice of election posted outside. Sevrance saw it; and then, chancing to glance past the door, his eyes met McQuirg's, where the latter sat with his chair tipped against the wall, his long fingers stuck in his black flowered waistcoat. A black cigar stuck between his yellowed teeth.

The chair came down with a bump when McQuirg recognized the riders, and he raised his hand.

"Hold on, Sevrance!" he called.

Sevrance pulled up easily. Anderson looked at him with surprise and drew in his mount a few feet away. But the boss of Ridoro favored him with no more attention than he did the dust of the main street. He halted, his hand on the mane of Sevrance's black mount.

HE smiled in apparently friendly fashion but his dangerous black eyes made the smile wolfish. "Been hearin' about you since y' got to town, pardner," he chided. "You've sure managed to be active since y' landed. Why all the calls?"

"Social," Sevrance replied dryly. "I'm aimin' to make my stay in Ridoro a social success. No objections?"

"None whatever!" McQuirg turned back to his office. "I jes' wanted you to meet the new sheriff, who'll be elected tomorrow night. That's why I stopped you. Hey, Jeff!"

A man taller than either Sevrance or McQuirg emerged sleepily from the office and stood in the doorway blinking at the sunlight. Sevrance had a chance to observe his huge red hands, the pistols hanging loose from either hip, and the raw, sunburnt face. What srtuck him most of all, though was the cruel mouth, thick and shapeless, and the tiny, reddish eyes in that big red face.

"Henderson, this is *Mister* Sevrance," said McQuirg pointedly. "Jeff Henderson, Sevrance, soon to be Ridoro's sheriff. Y' might want to know him.'

Sevrance had been apprehensive lest one of those raw red hands be offered him, for he had no desire to enter a fight this early in the game. But Henderson, emerging at a lazy shuffle, looked him over insolently and nodded enigmatically.

"Howdy," he permitted himself.

"This is a right nice town, pardner, if yo're on the right side o' the street. How yuh votin' tomorrer?"

"I don't know," Sevrance returned, "that I'm voting."

McQuirg started suspiciously. "Not votin'?"

"I'm not a resident," Sevrance smiled.

McQuirg gave a short laugh. "Is that all? Well, this is a special election, Sevrance. I'll see that y' vote—ten or twelve times, if y' want to."

Sevrance's reply was a cold smile and an entirely non-committal "Thanks."

But Henderson was more suspicious than his chief—outwardly, at least. "That bein' the case," he drawled, "I'll ask yuh again—How yuh votin'?"

"And I," drawled Sevrance again, "don't know that I am voting."

McQuirg stepped back a pace and stuck his thumbs in his belt, arms akimbo. The angle of his black cigar was belligerent. "Why?" he spat.

"Because—" Sevrance's smile was steelly cold—"I'm one o' those old-fashioned birds, McQuirg, who believes that a vote ought to count as placed. And I'm not anxious to have mine changed before it reaches the ballot box. *Adios amigos!*"

Perhaps the most baffling quality about Sevrance to those ranged against him, was his ability coolly to turn his back upon them after shooting his last bolt, leaving them to wonder for a moment about his meaning. By that time, the psychology of his retreating, contemptuous back had time to sink in and they knew he had not been afraid, either.

He was riding away before McQuirg could swear. Henderson only stood looking after him, his red hands hanging at his sides, an expression of curiosity and deadly menace in his little piggish eyes.

Slowly he turned to his chief. "That hombre's gotta be got," he said. "Do I do it?"

McQuirg regarded him contemptuously. "Ain't you gonna be sheriff?" he demanded. "An' besides, I don't know if y' could do it!"

He was looking after Sevrance again, thoughtfully. "No, somethin' tells me it'll cost a couple o' good men to put him away. But he's gotta out of the way." He shrugged. "Well, if I can't land him with us, maybe I'll make him kill somebody an' then you can arrest him, Jeff!"

CHAPTER VIII

"You're Trespassing!"

SEVRANCE and Joe Anderson had galloped on side by side until they left Ridoro behind them before the old storekeeper turned with a thin smile. "By the looks o' them two," he volunteered, "yuh didn't leave 'em with any protests of endurin' affection."

"No. I told 'em I wasn't voting tomorrow because I object to having my vote changed." Sevrance smiled coldly. "The best part is, they don't know where I stand yet."

"That's enough reason for 'em to finish yuh up right pronto," the older man said. "Wherever yuh stand, they know yuh ain't afraid of 'em, an' therefore yo're dangerous. You an' McQuirg'll be havin' a showdown soon."

Sevrance made no reply. He already had a good idea of just about what his life was worth in Ridoro. After a long time Anderson spoke again.

"The other crowd don't know where yuh stand, neither. Yuh made an impression last night, too, son—but it wasn't no nice one?"

"They think I'm lined up with him?"

"No . . ." Anderson found it hard to go on. "They think—yo're afraid!"

He shot Sevrance a quick apprehensive look. It had not been easy for Joe Anderson to say that. But he was more than surprised when his companion gave no sign he had heard. All Sevrance said was, quietly—

"That doesn't matter."

They rode on after that in silence.

For a while, the trail led along an open, verdureless space, flooded by the intense glare of the sun and skirting the rim of the desert. Even the trail was covered with fine dust from the last windstorm. Eastward stretched the white sands, unending miles of them grim and naked, inert under the fierce heat, with lonely, upflung arms of giant cactus like exiled martyrs dotting the ghostly pallor of that void at far intervals.

To the left of them, north and west, the mountains sloped down into the verdant foothills. On the higher slopes, as they rounded a shoulder of land, two ranches could be made out, bunkhouses and corrals sprawling indolently over patches of brown and green.

And to the northeast was Mestizo Pass, a tiny slit like a knife nick in the sombre purple of the ranges at that height. Only slightly above it even the lower peaks were white with the snow of that altitude.

They came out upon the broad sweep of the plain, where the trail twisted for miles until it became lost, vague and dark, in the road leading to the pass. But crossing it, extending from a little more than halfway down a steeper slope, was a ridge of dark green foliage merging above with the colorless growth of the distance.

"That's where Cattle Creek starts to be," Joe Anderson said pointing. "And there—" gesturing to the nearest of the ranch houses, visible for just an instant before a shoulder of rising ground cut it off from view of the trail for miles—"there's Sunset Rancho. Them's Miss Muriel's cattle up yonder."

Sevrance studied the overgrown declivity and the trees which hid the actual trend of the watercourse from sight. Farther on it crossed the trail and he remembered where a small bridge had once spanned it.

"Miss Ferguson's land must extend almost to the trail," he observed.

"No. See that white post—'bout a mile up the slope? We're headin' for it right now." Anderson turned his pony's head and suited action to his word. "That's jest been driven in. It's the barbed wire line an' the southern limits o' Sunset hacienda. They've jest begun markin' boundaries since trouble started."

Sevrance nodded and put his horse to a gallop. "Just a half mile too far north," he muttered. But when Anderson questioned him, he said nothing.

THEY rode through tall, thick grass which slowed their pace down a long slope toward where the green of the open merged with the declivity that the creek made in a deeper, more prodigal splashing of bushes, mimosa and cottonwoods.

Anderson led the way. He bent over his pony's neck to pass under the wide-flung arm of a powerful tree which cut off a view of the creek. Then he slid his mount down a steep slope to where the water flowed placidly below. The trees made a canopy of shadowy green, through which the sun filtered like raw, dusted gold, patterning the placid water of the silent, idyllic spot.

Looking across the stream, Sevrance saw a cleared space on the gentler slope beyond.

"Ford here," ordered the storekeeper, and his pony splashed in the clear water. The bottom was sandy, studded with round stones and pebbles,

easily negotiable. They came up on the farther side and Anderson dismounted.

"See where them pegs are?" he pointed. Sevrance, dropping from the saddle, saw a series of pegs driven into the moist earth about eight yards above the stream bank. He nodded.

"That was Pete's tent," Anderson said quietly.

Sevrance walked up to the spot in silence. His face was stern; not even grief was written there. Almost, he seemed to be thinking of other things. Behind his blank, stony eyes lay a secret, which perhaps only old Solo Pete could know—now.

"He was pannin' a little while he was investigatin' the mineral rights," Anderson said slowly.

A bitter smile twisted Sevrance's lips. "It was—investigated, all right, wasn't it, Joe? But the story's not over till *I'm* finished—investigating!"

He moved down to the edge of the stream and Anderson's sombre eyes followed him. Near the streambed a rusty pan lay on the bank, battered and full of holes. There was a mute look of forgotten, useless things about it—a look that made Sevrance's hard lips twitch slightly. He touched it with his foot, tentatively. Anderson was at his side.

"Did he take any out?" he asked idly. "The gold?"

"No. Pete was too honest. He wanted to be sure o' the title, first. Panned a little, but kept track all the time. He jest *had* to be pannin'."

Sevrance nodded understanding. "And the others? If the Fergusons own it, are they going to follow up?"

"I reckon not. Sunset pays well enough, an' gold ain't everything. Look what it's brought to Ridoro. Miss Muriel says she ain't gonna touch it."

Sevrance was nodding softly.

Suddenly he became aware that he and Anderson were not alone. Looking up, he saw two horses halfway down the opposite bank; and riding them were the two people who had greeted him first in Ridoro.

Muriel Ferguson sat with compressed lips, her eyes stern and her gaze level. Borden sat his sorrel a little behind her.

"This is the place we told you about," the girl offered coolly. "Cattle Creek—and I think I mentioned that it was on my land."

Sevrance stared at her. He was co enwrapped with his own thoughts that he did not comprehend, for the moment.

"Yes," he said, "you did."

"Which means," the girl continued "that you are trespassing. I'm just beginning to realize why Ridoro and its troubles mean so little to you."

"Are you?"

SEVRANCE'S eyes suddenly flashed. Anderson opened his lips to speak, but his companion put a restraining hand and shook his head. "No," he said quietly.

The storekeeper dropped back, baffled. He could not understand. Solo Pete and Muriel had been friends. Why shouldn't he tell her why Sevrance was here.

The latter seemed about to say something, but he evidently thought better of it. He only nodded.

"I'm no more interested in your gold than I am in Ridoro's troubles," he said quietly. "But if my being here bothers you—I'll go."

There was something of constraint and dignity in his manner when he spoke that caused a swift shade of contrition to sweep across her face. He turned away, Anderson watching him with wondering eyes. Then suddenly the indifference dropped from him and he whirled upon the girl.

His eyes were mocking, arrogant.

"You dislike me don't you?"

She looked at him evenly. "I'm quite certain that I do," she replied.

"Why?"

Her eyes fell for an instant. "Principally, I suppose, it's because you stand apart when there's a need for every man in Ridoro these days," she said haltingly.

He smiled. "Then to win your graces, all I have to do is something utterly foolish? Suppose I let myself get shot up just for the privilege of seeing you at the polling place tomorrow night—that will help, you think?"

Her little chin went up angrily and her lip curled. She caught up her bridle.

"From what I've seen, Mr. Sevrance," she said spiritedly, "there's no need to fear for your getting into danger—anywhere. You're too—careful!"

She dug in her spurs savagely, angered at the mocking light in his eyes, and her surprised mount went bounding up the bank. Sam Borden blinked and cocked his head slightly in Sevrance's direction until he caught Sevrance's soft smile. Then, permitting himself the ghost of an answering smile, he brought down his quirt and vanished.

Anderson drew a long breath. "Well, I'll be damned! She shore ain't dyin' with affection for yuh, son."

Sevrance was still smiling at the shaking leaves and branches that gave evidence of her hasty passage. "I'm not too sure of that," he muttered. "But Lord, isn't she glorious, Joe?"

Anderson stared. "What? Yuh mean yuh like her?"

"Could anyone help it? Joe, I've got an idea that when I ride back through Mestizo Pass, she's going with me."

"Yuh've shore got a funny way o' showin' yore devotion," the older man grunted. "Yuh made her madder'n hell for talkin' so sassy, Jim."

Sevrance sighed. His face was sober again. "It doesn't matter. There are things to be finished—first. Later, perhaps, she'll know."

"Why didn't yuh tell her all about it when she was here?" Anderson demanded, when they were heading back for the open trail.

"Why should I?" Sevrance was staring straight ahead. "She didn't ask for explanations, Joe. And there's some things a man keeps to himself — till he's damn' sure he's being listened to by a friend."

CHAPTER IX

The Trouble Shooter

SEVRANCE saw himself standing alone—playing a completely lone hand in the three-cornered fight in the Quicapos Valley.

That was what it amounted to, virtually. He and McQuirg were aligned against each other; each of them knew that. For the present there was a question of policy which conspired to becloud the real issue.

It took no amount of reasoning for Sevrance to figure out, that night, just what the fight must be. McQuirg had his moves mapped out for him—he had to make them according to schedule!

First he must control Ridoro—control it legally as he now controlled it in fact. And his control was virtually assured following the election.

Afterward, he could set his band to work. Rustling would soon milk the ranchers dry—there would be no chance of reprisals, or justice. With the law on one hand and a mob of gunfighters on the other, McQuirg could continue his way until he absorbed the beaten ranchers one by one, and owned the valley.

In the meantime, there was the gold

in Cattle Creek. To jump the Sunset claims now would mean too much fighting. Muriel was standing firm, and McQuirg would know the breed. But he had to own Sunset Rancho and he had to have the gold in the creek.

After the election, that gold would be his next objective—and Muriel was the only consideration standing in his way. Sevrance doubted if the man, desperate and cold-blooded though he assuredly was, would use the same methods to rid himself of this girl's presence as he had with Solo Pete and Red. But it was either that or a harsher alternative.

Sevrance sat quietly behind a table at the Square Deal and found his muscles tensing with the thought. McQuirg was a handsome, devilish beast. He could almost take what he wanted. Force could be used to subdue Muriel to his will.

And tomorrow night, if she followed her intentions through—she might be walking into his hands!

Sevrance wondered why this girl must occupy all his thoughts. Her fight was his fight, suddenly. And on the heels of his wonder, he admitted to himself the truth.

Women had never had a part in his life. He did not even remember his mother. The old prospector had reared him with crude care. His boyhood was spent in a harsh land—the earlier West.

Later, he had fought his way tooth and nail, alone, through school in Chicago. He had even got as far as college in the East. After that, learning, and the bitter scramble to obtain it, palled. His life had made him a man of action; and so Sevrance left books and the past behind and sought his fortune in the direction that the winds of chance blew him.

Always there had been the desire to come back to the old desert rat who was his father—to make the old prospector's last years happy. He had set his mind on attaining to wealth with that one goal in mind. For himself, he had discovered early that he could earn more than he needed; and that was sufficient for him.

But with the passing years, there came the panicky feeling that he might be too late. Solo Pete must be getting old. Sevrance heard from him but seldom: there were letters in the crude, harsh handwriting now and then which crossed his zigzag pathways about the globe.

The mines of Kimberly beckoned. But the ground was all owned, mostly by large companies employing blacks for labor. Sevrance, with his knowledge of handling men, got a job with a lone, exiled Englishman who was attempting to gain a foothold. By his roundup of a gang of I. D. B.s—illicit diamond buyers—he gained a reputation for himself. After that, nursing his employer through a long illness, he found himself actually—if not legally—the head of the mine.

THE rest was swift and simple—one of those strokes of fate which come and then seem logical, after all, Sevrance's employer died of fever and Sevrance' found that he had been a partner in the enterprise for nearly a year, ever since it had been necessary for him to have arbitrary rule in his employer's illness.

He searched for relatives, but the Englishman was without kin. Overnight Sevrance was moderately wealthy. His next move was made on a quick decision.

To save entanglements, he disposed of the mine for a sum far below its value, placing a small share in the hands of a third white man who had been his assistant. Then he sailed for home. After ten years of fruitless wandering, in a week he had become moderately well off—beyond worry, at least,

for the remainder of his life.

It was not a career that had found any place for a woman, nor the tenderness that such association brings. Driving vengeance had brought Sevrance through Mestizo Pass—and suddenly, at sight of Muriel Ferguson, another emotion had been born.

All the sweetness and the fragility of her in this bold setting struck him at once — her utter femininity, so at variance with everything his life had known. He was free—footloose at last; and he had not thought of romance until he saw her.

Perhaps he had accepted most of these things unconsciously. Until, sitting in Vallance's place, he saw them all in their true light.

Yes, her fight was his fight Even if he and McQuirg were not already silent enemies, this was so. He thought for a moment of showing his colors, of joining with Sullivan and his ranchmen.

Then he shook his head. There were things to be accomplished first. Beside, he had his own way, and it was not the way of the hesitant cattlemen of the valley.

"They're gettin' ready for election over at the Palace." Sevrance looked up as Vallance dropped into a chair across from him. "Figurin' on makin' a vote?"

"What for? Everybody knows it's no good voting against Henderson."

Vallance nodded without conviction. He brushed the ashes carefully from his cigar and hunched forward, staring at the glowing tip.

"It's goin' to be rough," he said softly. "Heard that Miss Muriel's goin' to be there?"

"I hoped she'd forget that," Sevrance said.

"She won't." Vallance hesitated. "There's just one way, Sevrance, if yo're as interested as yuh say."

Sevrance met his eyes and wondered at the look of hunger and fear there. "Go on," he muttered.

"If Henderson an' McQuirg was shot up, there'd be no penalty. I got that straight from the marshal o' this district. Maybe—"

"Who's going to do the shootin', though?"

Vallance shrugged. "Two men, maybe. Two men like us, f'r instance, if we thought enough o' some folks to want to help."

Sevrance shook his head. "No go, Vallance. I'm not a trouble-shooter, until trouble comes my way. And we wouldn't get to McQuirg and Henderson without getting full of lead first."

Vallance sneered. "I had an idea yuh'd be willin' to do lots—for a certain party."

"Gettin' myself shot up with stunts that wouldn't do credit to a child, doesn't come into that," Sevrance retorted sharply. "I'll know my cues—when they come!"

"When they come—!" Vallance exclaimed. "There's some, Sevrance, who'll wade in right now. Some who love her enough—an' I'm one!"

HE brought up sharply, stunned at the words he had uttered. Then, his hard features flushed, he continued defiantly.

"Yeuh, just that. Now yuh know it! I reckon she can't care much for a gambler, maybe; but I'm square, anyhow. And I ain't afraid to do for her. Maybe, after the showdown, them things'll count."

Sevrance understood. There was only pity in his eyes at the haggard, hungry look in the gambler's.

"I don't blame you for loving her," he said quietly. "It's all up to her, though, I guess. You see, I love her too; but we can't decide things for her—here."

Vallance stared at him. In the same instant he seemed to want to pour out

his hopeless devotion and to spring at the throat of the quiet-voiced man opposite him. A sensing of Sevrance's sterner, finer fiber held him impotent. He had been inarticulate for a long time, stifling every sign of his devotion behind the mask of his hard features; and now he had confessed his thoughts to this man he knew for more fortunate than he.

He got up. "Maybe yo're right an' maybe yo're wrong, Sevrance," he said fiercely. "Right now, we're on the same side, even if we ain't playin' the same way. But some day—it's goin' to be you against me. Sabe that?"

"Whatever you say." Sevrance got calmly to his feet. "Right now there's more important things than that, though. I think I'll drift up toward the Palace."

Vallance's burning eyes followed him to the doorway, where he stood framed for a while. Oddly enough, the thought that Sevrance would ever shrink from trouble had never entered the gambler's mind. Neither jealously nor anger could give rise to that thought. He was only baffled—baffled to know what game Sevrance could be playing.

CHAPTER X

Trouble Brewing

SEVRANCE did not want to find trouble. As a matter of fact, should he run into it at the Big Horn Palace he knew it might spoil all his plans. But he had been two days in Ridoro, and except for making enemies and putting his life in danger, he had accomplished nothing of what he had come for.

He halted in the wide entranceway of the Palace and surveyed the moving, loud-voiced crowd within. There was a lot of drinking going on; the bar was crowded. The tables, too, were well patronized. There was a sprinkling of women among them.

It was not particularly an ugly crowd. With his knowledge of men, Sevrance classed it instantly. Except for the few who had come here with McQuirg originally, they were the usual riff-raff—mostly far from dangerous individually—but therefore all the more vicious in a mob.

At the farther end of the bar, near a small door marked "Office," a little group of men stood apart from the rest. Sevrance recognized Carver, the big gunman who had torn down the election notice the previous day. Beside him was a thin, swarthy Mexican wearing a gaudy sombrero—so swarthy that Sevrance judged him to be more Indian than Mexican. The Mexican was quite drunk and Carver was talking loudly.

Sevrance knew he had no need to seek companionship. He was prepared, too, for the momentary hush that fell when he pushed his way to the bar, near the Mexican.

The bartender looked up quizzically when his silver rang on the mahogany. He set out a bottle. "Stranger in this town, pardner?"

Sevrance agreed, but he appeared more interested in his glass.

"He's been here long enough t' know—" began a heavy voice at his elbow.

He turned. Carver had shouldered his way in between him and the slumping Mexican. "Had time to read that there notice yuh wanted so bad, pardner?" he demanded.

Sevrance met the red-glowing eyes without expression. He was aware that, though the hum of talk had not died down, he and Carver were under observation from every corner of the big room.

"Yes," he said. "I read it. Why?"

Carver hesitated. Sevrance's icy coldness and his steady gaze nonplussed him. Beside that, Sevrance seemed totally unaware of the menace of his hanging six-guns.

"It was a right fancy notice," he observed. "I was gonna tear off the useless side, sabe? But I reckon yuh'll be plantin' yore vote for Henderson anyway, won't yuh?"

"I haven't decided." Sevrance's eyes never wavered.

"Ain't decided!" Carver guffawed. "Well, the decidin's done fer yuh, stranger." He came closer, his heavy stubble-breaded face glowering. "You'll vote right tomorrer, pard, or yuh'll be findin' yore trail back through the pass with the lead warmin' yore footsteps. Savvy?"

"Not entirely." Sevrance straightened; his voice took on a metallic note. "Is that something like a threat?"

Carver drew back, his eyes dangerous. His heavy jaw shot out in warning. His thumbs were stuck in the lower pocket of his vest, ready. There was an almost imperceptible moment of intense quiet. During it, the Mexican hunched himself closer, grinning foolishly; and Carver's second companion moved up. The gunman looked around, seeking to derive fresh courage from their presence.

"How'd yuh guess that?" he said menacingly. "If I wasn't threatenin', amigo, yuh might jest as well take it as such, cause—"

Sevrance's hand was nowhere near the gun under his coat. Perhaps McQuirg understood what that meant—that and the way his fingers were touching his lapels idly. At any rate his voice broke in with icy authority—

"You wasn't threatenin' anybody, Carver!"

McQUIRG had emerged unnoticed by the present group, from the office at the end of the bar. Carver took a step backward, his belligerence gone; and the Mexican stared. McQuirg stepped to the bar and ordered two drinks quietly, unmindful of the hush that had fallen upon the place. He smiled at Sevrance.

"Your friend Carver seems bent on trouble," the latter offered coolly. He glanced past McQuirg to the Mexican and a plan formed in his mind on the instant. The Mexican was obviously impressed, in his drunken stupor, with Sevrance's importance.

"He'll quiet down," McQuirg said, with a glance over his shoulder. "I'd like 'em all to know, Sevrance, that you're one of us. As it is, they don't know where you stand!"

"Isn't it possible to be—undecided?"

McQuirg smiled coldly. "It may be—till tomorrow. The votin' will show. After that, Sevrance"—his voice lowered—"there's goin' to be room in Ridoro for brains and guts. You've got both—I know. Better throw in with me."

Sevrance met his eyes. McQuirg did not wish him well, he knew. Yet he thought he understood. So far as the boss could guess, Sevrance was another of his own stamp. He might be glad to have him at his side, later. This was a last chance.

Tomorrow — tomorrow, Sevrance knew he would have to reveal his stand. McQuirg would know then. Thus it would not harm anything to get what information he could.

"Just how big is your game, McQuirg?" he asked softly. "Worth while?"

The other man's eyes gleamed. "Can't y' see what it's worth?" he demanded fiercely. "There's Cattle Creek—gold—and a rich valley. I'm boss already. Why, before I'm through the Quicapos Valley's goin' to be a border empire!"

"Rustling?"

"Rustling — until they're so weak they can't stand any more. Then I'll take 'em all over. Cattle Creek first, and Sunset." McQuirg's smile was cold and deadly.

The Mexican was making an attempt to leave the bar. Sevrance caught sight of him and straightened.

"Sounds big enough," he said quietly. "I'll decide soon enough."

McQuirg surveyed him meaningly. "I'll know you decision at the votin'—tomorrow night," he said.

Sevrance nodded. The Mexican had just reeled through the door, alone. "All right. I'm still working for Vallance, so I'll trail back."

In the doorway, Sevrance seemed in no particular hurry. But when he was out of sight of the Palace, he caught sight of the Mexican weaving along the street farther down. He quickened his pace.

McQuirg's henchman was holding himself up at a hitching rack when he reached him. With a cheering nod, Sevrance extended his arm.

"Steady, amigo!" he said cheeringly.

The Mexican looked up angrily, his eyes dull. Then he recognized Sevrance and appeared to recall the scene at the bar. His lips spread in a yellow-fanged smile.

"Oh—*'sta bueno!* I will sit here, señor; *gracias!* It is to this place I came—to sit until this thrice accursed head shall cease its turning." He lowered himself precariously to the board sidewalk.

Sevrance shot a cautious glance up and down the deserted street. "The Señor McQuirg tells me you are a brave man, *caballero,*" he observed.

"Brav'? Me?" The Mexican's head came up. "I am Rogerio, and Rogerio is brav'. He tol' you this?"

"He told me, yes," Sevrance said confidentially. "I am one of his good friends. I am all ready to join with him tomorrow night," he added meaningly.

THE Mexican's breath hissed inward through his teeth. "*Si!* That is good. If the woman will enter the business of men, it is her choosing; is it not so?"

Sevrance's eyes narrowed swiftly. He had not expected anything like this. Rogerio sat staring angrily at the toe of his boots.

"*Si,* it will be right," he growled, "—but what will we do wit' her when we have taken her off? In Mexico, it would be ransom; but here—who shall pay the ransom? A vaquero—that foreman who is wit' her always?"

Sevrance's face could not be seen in the dark, which was fortunate. He restrained his surprise. It was other information he sought.

"What will he do with her?" he shrugged lightly. "Well—what did he do with Solo Pete, who was in his way, too?"

He waited, tense. But the effect of his careful words was disastrous. Rogerio turned deepset, burning eyes upon him, and got slowly to his feet, backing off.

"If you know of that, it is well to keep silent, *amigo mio,*" he said huskily. "That is a mos' easy way to die, which is why I have forget—all I know. *Buenas noches!*"

He went reeling up the street, and Sevrance rose and looked after him, baffled.

He had failed in his attempt to find out the identity of his father's murderer. Oddly enough, by chance he had stumbled onto news scarcely less tragic.

He shook his head. This was a slow, hard game that he had entered. Strange, however, the way the two purposes he had were slowly becoming involved into one.

CHAPTER XI

"Hands on Your Guns!"

IT WAS not a pleasant task that Sevrance set for himself as a result of the information he had so unwittingly gathered. But it was a necessary one.

Muriel Ferguson had to be dissuaded from her rash plan of entering the town that night. And yet when, on the day of election, Servance started out for Sunset Rancho, he knew his attempt was going to be futile.

He had told Vallance nothing. Toward noon, he saddled his big black and rode out alone.

There was no one in sight when he reached there. Beyond the big, roomy house, he could glimpse the corral and the clump of cottonwoods sheltering a cool old well. A Chinese cook emerged from the doorway when he reined in at the veranda steps, and informed him—not without a suspicious look—that Sam Borden was in the rear and that Miss Ferguson was probably there, too.

Sevrance found the foreman mending a buckboard trace with clumsy fingers, squatted on a wagon tongue; and above him stood the mistress of Sunset, flicking at her riding boots with the quirt slung from her wrist.

They both looked up at Sevrance's approach. He dismounted and moved toward them in silence.

"You've got a quiet place here," Sevrance observed. "I wondered if I'd find anyone at home."

Muriel Ferguson was still regarding him with hostility in her blue eyes; but she returned, "I've got only two men left on the range. One scooted out when the trouble began—over the pass; and another was shot when they got my brother. He's upstairs, in bed."

Sevrance nodded gravely and looked at her. "And in the face of that, you're going to risk yourself in town tonight?"

She frowned. "I fail to see why you've interested yourself in my movements, Mr. Sevrance. I've come to expect just the opposite of you—when trouble is concerned."

"That doesn't matter." He was unruffled. "I happen to know that it's more dangerous than you think—to go there tonight."

"You *know?*"

He met her eyes. "Yes. I know."

Borden fixed him with a querulous look. Sevrance's voice and his manner carried conviction.

"Maybe you'll tell me just what the danger is," the girl said, frankly unwilling to be friendly.

"That's unimportant, too," Sevrance returned. "But the fact is—you're to be kidnaped. Of course, that might be avoided—with a lot of shooting and bloodshed. But I know you won't bring that on."

"I said I'd go." That simple statement was intended, he gathered, to be the last word.

But he was not expectant of what came. Borden had hunched himself nearer and dropped the trace, keeping his earnest eyes on Sevrance. But suddenly Muriel threw back her head and her lips parted in contemptuous laugh.

"I've just begun to understand," she said scornfully. "McQuirg sent you—to keep me away! And it's because he's coming to be afraid. They don't want shooting; they want to elect Henderson on a bluff and they know if I come I'll cause enough trouble to break up the whole scheme. And so you're elected to keep me out of the way!"

Sevrance remained unmoved. "Do you believe that?" he asked steadily.

"Why not? It's the kindest thing to believe. Else—you're a traitor to both sides—or how could you know their plans?"

"I expected you'd think that," Sevrance said calmly. "But whatever you think, certainly you can lose nothing by staying here—and I can gain nothing. You're safe in any event, so at least you can't accuse me of wanting to harm you."

"I'm not certain." There was a good deal of uncertainty in her eyes, too, when she faced him. "You're too mysterious, Mr. Sevrance," she went on thoughtfully. "You attend Uncle Dan's meetings and you know McQuirg's plans; You work with Steve Vallance, pretending not to care for anything—and still survey Cattle Creek rather carefully. It's all very confusing—

"So confusing," she finished, turning away and slapping the quirt against her boot, "that I'm going through with my original plans. Sam Borden—and I—will be there tonight!"

SEVRANCE watched her go. She swung with her lithe, confident walk up along the path, pulled back the screen door to the kitchen, and let it slam behind her. For a moment afterward there was the dead silence of hot mid-afternoon.

Sevrance frowned. He knew now he had made an error. He should have informed Sullivan of what he had learned—or even Vallance. She might have believed them. As it was, he knew that he had only strengthened her determination.

A low cough reminded him that Sam Borden was still beside him. He turned, in the act of swinging into his saddle. The eyes of the two men met. Sevrance smiled a little.

"You're going to have a tough job tonight, Borden," he offered.

The foreman-deputy nodded phlegmatically. "I reckon so," he agreed. He hesitated a moment, studying the other man thoughtfully. "How'd yuh get yore information, pardner?" he asked softly.

"By accident. I was looking for information about—something else."

Sevrance waited. The foreman nodded slowly and his long nose wrinkled. "Too bad yuh didn't let somebody else break it to her," he said at last.

"Then you believe it?"

"O' course!" Sam Borden met him eye to eye. "I knowed somethin' was comin', anyhow; but I didn't know what to expect. They's no holdin' Miss Muriel, though, pardner, once she gets her mind set."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

Sam Borden shrugged. "Bout the same. I gotta be there anyhow, so I'll simply follow through. We can't call the ranchers out for trouble till it comes."

Sevrance gathered in his reins and nodded. He slipped a foot into his stirrup. "There'll be somebody else there, Sam," he said quietly. "Be ready for anything, though."

Borden got to his feet as Sevrance swung into the saddle. "I'm used t' bein' ready for things, workin' on Sunset," he said. Suddenly he put out his hand; and as Sevrance took it, "See yuh tonight," he grunted, and turned away toward the tool shed.

Sevrance smiled quietly and turned to his mount. At least he had one friend on Sunset hacienda.

Why did Muriel hate him so, he wondered.

But for the present, that did not matter. There was much to be done. The feud that lay between him and McQuirg, unspoken and waiting, was about to break out. As McQuirg had said, he would know—that night.

Sevrance's face, as he rode back over the winding trail, was grim. Muriel might become more of an enemy, too, after he had done what he contemplated. But that mattered little. She was in danger and she must not come

to harm; that was all.

Sunset Gold he hadn't considered, but he had been seeking it, after all. Not the worthless dross of the creek bed, but the other gold of Sunset—the golden creature she was.

The object of his quest in Ridoro, he told himself quietly, had altered.

CHAPTER XII

Election Night In Ridoro

THIS was different from even the exciting election nights Sevrance remembered out of his childhood. Riot was let loose. Stores had been closed since sundown, and bars had been flung open wide. Liquor flowed free, and he who could not pay could usually drink his fill, anyway.

Yellow light was flung from the open saloon doorways half across the still warm dust of the main street, and from inside these emporiums came a bedlam of noise; shouts and laughter and loud talk, punctured at intervals with a whoop and a volley of careless pistol shots.

Vallance's place was well filled by a drifting crowd. But McQuirg's Big Horn Palace was the center of activity. It was here that the election was taking place.

A lot of voting had been done during the day; but the fever of excitement hanging over the town was a presage of the night to come. The polls had been closed at sundown, and were to reopen at nine o'clock. Perhaps all this was McQuirg's strategy; he knew he could handle this sort of a crowd best, and he knew that the men from the ranches —if they voted at all—would not be doing so until evening.

And early evening saw the boss's grip on Ridoro tighten like steel.

He had been standing aloof, watching for hours; and in his hard black eyes there was a gleam of satisfaction over the riotous scene at the Palace. There was a black cigar between his thin lips. But even Henderson did not approach him. McQuirg only watched —and waited.

Overhead, stretched from tip to tip of the grim mountains hemming in the Quicapos Valley, the calm vault of the heavens pressed down serene over the rangeland and desert. But this only made the little town seem more aloof and isolated from all the world. It was McQuirg's "border empire."

Tomorrow there would be tales of a night of orgy and blood in Ridoro—tales that would drift slowly through Mestizo Pass and remind old-timers of the young West. But tonight it was by itself, a lost planet among the imperturbable stars.

McQuirg's most trusted men drifted in and out of Vallance's place in twos and threes. Sevrance knew what their presence meant. He, too, was aloof, like the boss of Ridoro. Vallance was not in sight. He had closed himself in the little room he used behind the bar.

Sevrance understood the meaning of the presence of McQuirg's silent-faced men. He and Vallance were suspected of friendliness with Sullivan and the ranchers. There were to be no chances taken tonight.

Yet Sevrance had told nobody else of what he knew of McQuirg's plans. He had early decided, after his unsuccessful visit to Sunset, that he must keep on at his own game—the lone hand.

To give out the alarm would be to provoke a bloody battle between unequal forces, right in the main street of Ridoro. The ranchers were not ready, and McQuirg had control. To attempt to protect Muriel with the few men who could be counted on was to invite dis-

aster. Sevrance knew there was but one way.

The Mexican employed by Vallance for sweeping and keeping the saloon in order, sidled through the door, picked up a wet rag, and commenced wiping off the table. When he came to where Sevrance sat alone, he lowered his head.

"The señorita is coming into town—with the foreman, señor."

Sevrance gave no sign that he had heard. He waited until the peon was gone, and then shot a swift glance about the room. He got up slowly.

Possibly, he told himself, it was all right for Vallance to know now. The gambler could do nothing at this stage to bungle things, and even his rashness would be no more than the rashness that the next few minutes would demand.

Muriel was entering the town with Sam Borden, as she had promised—and McQuirg was waiting. Probably he planned to abduct her. After that—Sevrance had no idea, but it was enough. Once the girl was in McQuirg's power and the election won, as it was bound to be—there would be no postscript.

PROBABLY McQuirg would stage the semblance of a free-for-all fight, and the act would be accomplished under cover. Even his gang could not be held responsible for the girl. And her very presence would be the signal for excitement to start. Sullivan and his men must be coming into town about now.

"The Z-Bar-Z boys were just leaving the Palace," announced a cowpuncher who entered the Square Deal at that moment and rolled toward the bar.

Sevrance heard, but gave no sign. If Sullivan and his men had voted and were leaving—well, it meant not one thing or another. If they got out before Muriel came, it would prevent a lot of shooting, he guessed.

He moved away, intending to enter the room in which Vallance sat. One of McQuirg's men, eyeing him idly, shifted casually to where he stood in front of that door. Another joined him.

Sevrance hesitated. They did not intend that he should get to Vallance!

It was useless to provoke a fight at this stage. Sevrance was not ready. It was a few minutes too early to show his hand. Beside, he could reach Vallance from the rear of the cantina, where a window opened onto the back.

Coolly he moved to the bar. "I'm going over to vote, Ike," he said carelessly. "Tell the boss I'll be back right away."

McQuirg's gunman heard. Sevrance went calmly through the street door. Ten steps he took in the direction of the Palace. No one was watching him, no one followed him.

Suddenly he fell sidewise and into the dark of the alley running between the saloon and the small outfitting store next door. Hurrying through here, he circled the house, making certain he was not followed, until he came to where a yellow shade moved in and out with a faint breeze in an open window.

His hand on the windowsill, Sevrance suddenly froze in place. There came a bump of some heavy object on the table top beyond that shade, and a man's voice—

"Reckon it might not matter, anyways, Vallance, but we're just gonna make shore yuh don't get into trouble tonight. Sabe?"

Sevrance drew back.

"Yuh fool!" came the gambler's voice. "What makes yuh think I've got a play up my sleeve?"

"Nothin'," drawled the first speaker. "Slim here, an' me—" So there were two of McQuirg's men in the room!—

"we're jest takin' the chief's orders. Reckon maybe he's kinda fond of yuh, Vallance, an' he don't wanta see yuh get hurt nowheres. This town's liable to be powerful smokey tonight."

Silence followed. Sevrance could imagine Vallance within, back in his chair and fuming impotently. He instantly discarded any idea of entering to help his employer. They intended Vallance no harm, that was clear. McQuirg was simply making sure of one man of whom he was doubtful.

It all indicated that things were due to begin. There was nothing for it; Sevrance had to go on alone. Vallance would be released when the trouble was over. But meantime, Muriel's danger grew with every passing second.

As Severance drew away, he heard a match rasp across a table top and a long sigh. Vallance was evidently resigning himself to the inevitable.

He reached the stables, where his big black was saddled and waiting. Whatever was to come, it was well to have the horse in readiness. He led the animal along in the rear of the buildings which fronted on the main street, until a burst of sound from ahead of him warned that he was approaching the Palace.

HE dropped the reins and left the black alongside a trio of saddled mounts which stood there in the dark. A window arose just on a level with his eyes, opening on a room to which the door was flung back, and giving him a sidelong view of the interior of McQuirg's honky-tonk.

The scene within was just about what Sevrance expected. The big barroom was crowded with an uproarious, hilarious crowd. At the bar men pushed each other to get close; they were lined two and three deep. Over the turmoiled scene cigar and cigarette smoke shifted in lazy blue and brownish layers, obscuring faces and clouding the poor lights.

The voting table was near the window, to the right of the bar. Behind it sat three men, their guns on the table before them. Men drifted up, wrote down names; and then, laughing, stuffed the papers into the ballot box.

"How many times is that for yuh, Jake?" came in a raucous laugh from one of the men behind the table.

There was a roar. "Hell! This is evenin', ain't it?" the questioned one retorted. "Yuh jest opened, ain't yuh—I ain't voted since this afternoon!"

Sevrance caught a glimpse of McQuirg as he drew back. Out in the street there was the sound of pony's hoofs. McQuirg straightened, moving the black cigar from his mouth, as a man came in the doorway and stared at him.

"Comin' now," Sevrance saw the words form on the newcomer's lips.

He knew what they meant. Every eye was turned to the doorway; the bellowing and shouting in the room settled down to a steady hum of sound. Outwardly there was no word.

Sevrance placed his hand on the sill and eased himself into the small room. No one saw him sidle through the doorway and stand against the wall near the voting box.

CHAPTER XIII

Blood Before the Bar

SULLIVAN and his men had gone, evidently. Apparently they had hoped that Muriel would have abandoned her rash plan. There were a number of faces in that smoke-reeking room that Sevrance could not remember having seen before, but not one that he recognized as a possible friend.

"All the better—they'll be in each other's way," he said grimly.

He gave no sign that he knew the next few moments would inevitably see him face to face with death. He was cold and hard, his eyes expressionless. His arms were folded across his chest and he leaned against the wall idly. No one had noticed him, and he was watching the doorway with the rest.

McQuirg had not moved. There was a half second of strained silence—of tense waiting—and then Sam Borden and Muriel Ferguson were framed in the big doorway.

The first sign of life came into Sevrance's eyes at sight of her. She stood there in all of her fine, majestic contempt for these men and this scene. She knew how dangerous they all were, and the contempt in her eyes could only lash their fury.

But she gave no sign that she knew this. She was as out of place as a princess of the blood in such a pigsty. Her scornful eyes swept the sullen face and the reeking room. Suddenly there was not a sound.

Muriel snapped her quirt against a riding boot with that little gesture she had.

"Well, we're here," she announced for all to hear. "Come on, Sam," she went on scornfully. "You're casting your vote and we're looking over the rolls."

Sevrance's eyes lighted and a certain tensity gripped his lean frame. Yet he seemed not to have moved. He watched the girl, flanked by the rolling, chap-flapping cowboy, move across the room toward him. She had not seen him, either.

Someone gave a laugh. Someone else cursed in a low, hoarse whisper. There was a threatening movement from the men at the bar. Then Sevrance, watching, saw that a dozen pairs of eyes, at least, were fixed on McQuirg's impassive face, waiting for a sign.

McQuirg's eyes for the moment, though, were on Muriel. Sevrance guessed that, momentarily, he had lost himself. Those dangerous black orbs were alight with admiration — with something else, too, that made Sevrance's frame tighten and his hand steal instinctively toward his holster.

And then Muriel had reached the table. Behind it, the men watched McQuirg. He roused himself; his hand reached for his cigar, and a confident little smile twitched his lips.

Suddenly Sevrance understood the game. In the next split second McQuirg would give the signal. Someone would start shooting. There would be confusion, turmoil.

He tried to catch Sam Borden's eye, and he moved. McQuirg caught his cigar and raised it in a little gesture—upward. There was a quick movement— a gun flashed.

But even as it flamed and a man cursed, even as a second weapon echoed its crash, Sevrance moved.

"Sam Borden!" he cried. "Watch out —here!"

Confusion swept the hall. Borden saw his man, and instinctively he caught Muriel by the waist. In Sevrance's hand two guns gleamed wickedly. One was pointed straight for McQuirg, and Sevrance was crouched forward, his deadly eyes behind the weapons.

THERE came another curse—a gun moved. Sevrance's pistol barked twice, together, and a man slumped down across the bar. A second cried aloud and a gun clattered to the floor.

Sevrance made a wild leap across the tables and he suddenly swung the girl behind him. "That way" he commanded. "Through the window!"

Another gun spoke; the crowd was milling about. Curses and orders were shouted out hysterically. McQuirg ducked behind an up-ended table.

In the confusion that had hold of the interior of the Palace, Sevrance caught

the girl and swung her free of the crowd. He started with her toward the room at the rear through which he had entered.

Borden's gun was out—Sevrance heard it crack viciously behind him.

Muriel made a faint struggle. Sevrance heard her cry out in wondering protest, but he gave her no heed. They reached the room.

"Through there!" he cried, "— before they wake up to it. Quick!"

There was vibrant, unquestioned command in his harsh voice. His pistol cracked again as a man jumped up from behind the ballot box with a gun in his hand.

"Come on, Sam!"

Sevrance lifted the girl through the window and pointed to the waiting horses. Borden fired three times and tumbled backward through the room. He gasped. Sevrance leapt across the windowsash and the little deputy was at his heels. He caught the girl's arm and hurried her toward the horses.

"Mount!" he commanded.

"I won't go!" she cried. "You can't—"

Sevrance, his eyes blazing, swung upon her and with one swoop threw her into a saddle. The black was dancing. His hand still clutching the girl's arm, he flung himself into his own saddle. Then he dug in his spurs and the frightened animals started off with a wild leap.

"This way, Sam!"

"Comin'!"

There came a last wild volley of shots. A hail of lead swept along the darkened alleyway which Sevrance was following, behind the buildings. He had the bridle of Muriel's mount, and his black took the lead.

He twisted in his saddle and emptied one of his guns behind him.

Down the black alleyway the two horses tore side by side. If Muriel would have protested further, she seemed unable. The bridle of her horse was in Sevrance's hand, and he had control. She had all she could do to cling on in that first wild dash.

The effect of his last volley of shots had been to disperse the yelling mob that had been vomited out of the Palace through doors and windows. Wild shots came, lead that flew harmlessly all about. Wounded men were dragged away.

And then into the turmoil Sevrance was leaving behind him, McQuirg's voice cut like a snapping whip. Order was being restored. Henderson's ham-like hands were already clawing for a horse's bridle, and others began running for the hitching rack in front of the saloon.

OTHER saloons were emptying, too. But Sevrance's move had been so unexpected that he had a chance to make good his start. Galloping hoof-beats were behind him now. As he thundered past the rear of the saloons, he had swift flashes of shouting men, waving arms, pistol flashes, inside them.

Vallance's Square Deal was just ahead. He tore toward it, Muriel pounding beside him.

But before the Square Deal could be reached Sevrance heard a quick shot from somewhere in the vicinity, and a wild cry its echo. Confusion. Even as his mount, leaning toward Muriel's, pounded past it, a dark figure leapt through the window of Vallance's private room, pistol in hand.

There could be no chances. Sevrance whirled in his saddle as that weapon came up. Three times he fired as he swept past. The man fell backward and he had a swift vision of Vallance's white, strained face against the window light. He heard—

"Sevrance—yuh hound——!"

Riders were pounding along that

dark alleyway. Sevrance was past the Square Deal like the rushing wind; he ignored the girl's tortured cry. Leaning sidewise, he swung the two horses out from the end of the alley and gained the main street at the edge of the town.

He shot an anxious glance over his shoulder as the galloping hoofs behind him neared. Then he gave a breath of relief, recognizing the first of the nearing riders. It was Sam Borden, riding low in his saddle, turning just then to fire into the mass of pursuers emerging from the tangled chaos in front of the Palace.

Borden was catching up. Sevrance turned forward again, striking the trail that led through the foothills westward, black in the moonless night.

CHAPTER XIV

A Ride with Death

SEVRANCE felt a jerk on the bridle in his left hand. Turning, he met the girl's angry, burning eyes. But his own eyes held no contrition. His lips twisted bitterly.

"I told you they were going to kidnap you," he ground out. "As long as you didn't seem to mind it, I thought I'd do it. You'll find it easier before you're through!"

"I don't want your help!' came in a tense little cry that he understood. She knew what had happened. She knew he was right. But that it should have been he who saved her was hard to bear!

McQuirg's main body of riders were off now like hounds on the scent. Shots and wild yells punctuated the rapid pound of many hoofbeats. Sevrance led the way up the sloping trail that led into the foothills and circled, farther on, among the ranches west of town. Borden was just behind them; but the men who had started out on the deputy's heels in the first rush, were close, as well.

Sevrance reloaded as he rode. There was no longer any need to hold the bridle of the girl's mount.

Borden turned and fired again; and at the answering shot, Sevrance jerked in his saddle as the lead whipped by his cheek. Turning, he saw two riders closing in. Again the deputy fired, and again he was answered—but only by one shot. The second rider swung crazily from his saddle and disappeared.

Sevrance swung about to help. He could see Borden's strained, anxious face. Three shots barked as one. McQuirg's last rider dropped his smoking pistol with a cry, his horse reared, and then both were a twisting, struggling mass in the rear. In the same instant, however, Sam Borden gave a groan and seemed to be falling forward.

"Hit?" Sevrance demanded, as they drew together.

"Proper. Come on," was the grunt in reply.

Borden's hand was clapped against his throat and blood oozed through his fingers. Sevrance swung fiercely upon the girl.

"Ride!" he commanded. "I hope you'll see the need for it now!"

She made no reply. Sevrance slipped his arm under the cowboy's shoulder. "Can you make it?"

Borden nodded. "Reckon so. I'll hang on—an' pull leather," he grinned. "You jest try an' keep me goin' straight."

But Borden's mount did not need guiding. Between the other two horses, he kept his place, while the little deputy clung to his pommel and rode.

Sevrance, his guns filled, turned. The lights of Ridoro were already far off gleams against the blackness enwrap-

ping the countryside. Beyond, the desert hung like a white mist over the town.

Turning, Sevrance's eyes met the girl's. It was the first time since the beginning of the fracas that they had the chance to speak sanely. He wondered what her reactions were, now that she must understand. Or did she blame him for forcing the fight? But her first words were a surprise.

"All right—I was all wrong," she said. "Now, where are we heading?"

He hesitated. "I haven't had time to think beyond here," he returned.

It was hard to distinguish their pursuers, for horses and riders were hidden in the shadows of the rolling slopes over which the trail wandered. But they could be heard, urging on their horses with voice, quirt and spur, and occasionally a wild shot spat out, followed by wild yells. They were near enough, and with Borden's condition to be reckoned with, chances were slim, for McQuirg's men would hold on to the death.

"There's Sullivan's," Muriel began.

Sevrance shook his head. "Not a chance. In their mood, they'd burn down the Z-Bar-Z and everything in it. They're out for blood now, and it's Sullivan's they'll expect us to hit for."

Borden roused himself with difficulty, clinging weakly to his pommel. "Not Sullivan's," he said. "That gully, Miss Muriel—Pete's old shack by the spring, where we found them strays last fall."

Her eyes lighted. "Just the place!" she exclaimed. "I know the way—here, turn off the trail!"

SEVRANCE found himself lost again in admiration for her. Rash as her behavior had been, she was doing her best to make up for it now. That was the breed of which she came. She led on unerringly through the dark hills, branching northwestwardly from the main trail.

He recalled Borden's directions. Pete's old shack! Certainly it could not be the cabin where he and his father had lived in his early boyhood. They were not headed in that direction. But Pete had moved often in his roaming existence.

In any event, by turning from the trail they had gained something. In the darkness they could not be seen; and a few minutes later, McQuirg's gang could be heard roaring past the spot where they had branched off. They were not searching; it was evident that they were taking the destination of the fugitives for granted and heading for the Z-Bar-Z.

Sevrance whipped out a handkerchief and managed to twist a bandage about Borden's bleeding throat. The deputy was hanging on weakly. Then he looked across the wounded man's saddle and met the look of concern in Muriel's eyes.

"How far?" he asked.

She knew what he meant. With a swift glance at Borden, she returned, "Another half hour. Uphill. I think there's a few tins of food there, and we could hold off an army there, too, if we had to."

He nodded, looked again at Borden, who might not have heard them, slumped the way he was, like a sack. Sevrance's eyes were narrowed, and looking up again, they met the girl's look.

She seemed to understand the bitterness in his eyes this time, though he did not speak. She knew—she was realizing for the first time what her pride and rashness had done. She was realizing, too, how much more it might have done had it not been for Sevrance.

It was hard enough for her, Sevrance thought, and looked away. He could understand the sort of affection she must have for the game, faithful little deputy.

The ground over which they rode had been surprisingly level, which enabled

Borden to keep in the saddle. But now it commenced to rise; and ahead, Sevrance could make out the jagged walls and palisades marking this part of the foothills. In ten minutes they were at the bottom of a declivity and began climbing up over soft earth to a point where, as they approached, they could see a break in the terrain and a gully which beyond its mouth disappeared.

THERE had been no sign of their pursuers since they had left the trail, except for faroff shots that were borne down now and then on the breeze. Once there was a far-off confusion of sound from the direction of the trail, from which Sevrance gathered that a second party had ridden out.

"Most of them don't know the country well," he said aloud. "There's going to be the devil to pay at Sullivan's, though. They won't believe we're not there."

Muriel nodded. "Uncle Dan will let them search. He'll avoid trouble—at this stage, if he can."

The trail over which they were riding led steadily upward now, and at times it was very steep. There were spots where they rode single file, Borden second in line, between cuts in the rocks which would permit only one horse at a time.

It was emerging from one of these that Sevrance drew rein and whirled at a groan from Borden. Borden had not spoken for a long time. The foreman of Sunset was slipping sidewise from his saddle.

Sevrance's arm caught him. Borden could last no longer. He was unconscious from loss of blood. The handkerchief about his throat was soggy with it.

"Lead his horse," Sevrance ordered. "I'll carry him for the rest."

Borden was not a heavy man, but he was a dead weight. It was difficult, too, for Sevrance to hold him so as not to hurt him. They toiled on in silence until at last they emerged from a cleared, squared space overrun with lush grass and stunted shrubbery, and Muriel led the way up over a narrow path that circled out of sight behind a clump of mesquite.

Sevrance followed. A moment later they halted. Dark against the rocks which made the wall at the end of the narrow trail, stood a lonely little shack.

Sevrance considered it soberly. In the shifting shadows it was almost as if he could see old Solo Pete moving about here, alone, silent. The white rocks, jagged and uncompromising, towered up twenty feet on either side above the slanting roof; and behind it there was only the wall of the mountain, sheer for hundreds of feet until it joined with the slope above.

There was no need for Muriel to announce that they had reached their destination. For the time, at least, they were safe from McQuirg's men.

Sevrance slipped carefully to the ground and then eased the senseless figure of the cowpuncher after him. Picking up Borden in his arms, he strode across the open door of the little shack. Muriel followed, with a blanket she had taken from behind her saddle.

CHAPTER XV

Up to the Hilt

SEVRANCE sat at the edge of the rocks where he could gain a sweep of the wide, unfolding Quicapos Valley spreading beneath him. He wondered if his father had ever sat here thus, and he wondered what old Solo Pete's thoughts had been; the old prospector who had followed the trail of gold to the death that gold so often brings.

It was morning, and a brilliant sun played proudly over a magnificent valley.

Sam Borden's wound had not been bad of itself. But the loss of blood had been dangerous, and care had to be taken with it. He was weak and he had not recovered consciousness while Sevrance and Muriel worked over him the night before. Sevrance counted on a night of sleep making considerable improvement. The worst of it was that they had to take advantage of what crude facilities the deserted shack offered; for to return to Sunset now was out of the question.

The next move was in doubt. Sevrance knew he must decide it that day. He knew, too, that it must be drastic. The showdown could be staved off no longer—but McQuirg would be expecting it, too, and today Henderson was the law in Ridoro.

Muriel, the night before, had seemed to recognize that, in this situation, words meant little She had expressed her contrition simply and gravely, and then she had gone about accepting what was before them and carrying on.

"I couldn't know whom to trust," she said quietly. "I suppose I'm young, too —but my training gave me impatience. I couldn't understand why Uncle Dan and the others would do nothing in the face of what was coming. I tried to sting them into action. That was at the bottom of everything I did. And then you" —she smiled wistfully—"perhaps it was because I saw that you were the one man who could do something, and it angered me that you wouldn't try."

Sevrance nodded. "Of course," he said simply. "I might have told you more, but you didn't encourage it. Only —I'm used to playing a lone hand."

He left her in the shack, the smoky oil lamp turned low. Outside, he unsaddled the horses and picketed them, and then curled up in a blanket and slept.

But morning brought him facing facts again. It was good to be thus close to Muriel. He stood between her and her enemies; he stood beside her and before the world. What was more, she recognized it, and her trust—once she had given it to him—was complete and unquestioning. He knew that now she would do whatever he said.

But what was there to do?

He frowned. This was a new situation for him, and he began to have some sympathy with the hesitant ranchers. For the first time in his life, because he was responsible for a creature more beloved than himself, he had to consider danger!

He heard her cool "Good morning," behind him and turned from his brooding contemplation. "I wonder if we can manage some breakfast," she smiled.

She looked radiant and young, not at all harassed by the adventures of the night or their predicament. His eyes flashed their admiration and she seemed to sense it.

"Sam isn't awake, but he's been sleeping easily," she said hastily. "I think he'll be a lot better."

"Fine!" Sevrance started for the shack she had just vacated. "I'll take a look. I think I noticed a tin of tea on the shelf last night."

"And a tin of beans!" she added.

When he came out again, satisfied that Borden was sleeping off his first weakness, she had already begun a fire. She looked up quite calmly.

"I've been thinking—if we're to be here long, you might drop the 'Miss Ferguson'," she said coolly. "It's rather ludicrous, under these circumstances."

His eyes lighted. "I can thank McQuirg for something, then," he said. "Agreed — if you can remember my name has always been Jim."

HE understood, and said no more when she did not reply. There was

no longer question in his own mind: he loved her!

But this voluntary permission of hers had meant nothing but acceptance of their situation. He knew that. They were on a man-to-man basis, and he told himself that he must remember it.

She was wonderfully friendly. The strain that might have been between them, after all that had happened, was absent. She had acknowledged her own folly; and unlike most women, she had let it go at that. She understood and accepted the fact that the best atonement would be in placing her faith in the man who had saved her from her folly, and in doing all she could to help him.

The breakfast they managed to prepare was a crude meal, but it served. It was enough for a day, anyway—and they could last out longer, if necessary. Of course, when Borden wakened, he would have to be fed more carefully than they. But for the present there was plenty of water and Muriel had discovered an almost full sack of tobacco with papers in Borden's pocket.

Sevrance rolled a cigarette when the unsweetened but invigorating tea was down. He got up, his eyes thoughtful, and walked to the ledge of rock. Muriel's grave eyes followed him.

They could distinguish pursuit. They could guard against it easily. They were quite safe. But the big question remained—what next?

Sevrance, outlined against the sky, frowned darkly. He had definitely aligned himself against McQuirg. His life down there in Ridoro was worth nothing today. But Muriel—even his own mission must wait now until she no longer needed him.

McQuirg and his gang had to be driven out of Ridoro; that was certain. It would mean fighting, eventually. And Sullivan and his men would dally until McQuirg's grip became too strong to be broken. Already he had made good his strongest card, the election of his own sheriff.

He had to be stopped, and at once. To stop him would call for small strategy, or even planning. It needed a strong leader and desperate men; that was all.

Sevrance's swarthy features were hard, ruthless. He had forgotten the girl, who was watching his profile against the cloudless sky. He was recalling other scenes, wherein he had faced African savages, or white men a thousand times more desperate than McQuirg's avaricious pack—he and a few like him. There had never been compromise. There had never been compromise the world over, between decent citizens and the kind McQuirg represented.

Slowly he turned, unaware of the mask that his face had become. His eyes met the girl's look and he was startled at what he saw there. In her glance were mingled wonder, doubt, even a vague sort of fear.

"You—you were thinking?" she said uncertainly.

His face relaxed. "Yes. I was thinking that McQuirg has got to be driven out of Ridoro before it's too late."

"Is that what you were thinking of?"

"That—and the methods necessary," he returned grimly. He came over and stood over her, smiling a little. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know." She shivered a little. "Your face, I think. It looked so dangerous—so cruel! I was almost—afraid, watching you."

"You needn't be." There was nothing hard about him now. His voice was not too steady. "I suppose a man's life is stamped on his face, Muriel, and I haven't had a soft one. I was thinking of the danger you are in, and how to meet it."

"Of course!" she smiled with swift

contrition. "Forgive me—again! Your face was cruel. If I had been your enemy. But since last night," she said softly, "I think that look can only make me feel safer."

HIS hands clenched fiercely. "I hope I'll always be there when you have need to feel safe," he said huskily.

She nodded softly, her head bent.

"Somehow, I think you will be—until dangers are over," she said.

He stood looking at that glorious head for a moment; and then, turning swiftly on his heel, he entered the shack and bent over Sam Borden. The puncher's pulse beat steadily under his fingers; it was only slightly more than normal. Sam stirred, his eyelids quivered; then he was awake.

"What's—what's up?"

"We're all right," Sevrance assured him quietly. "Muriel's outside. We got you here last night. How do you feel now?"

"Not bad." Borden blinked at his surroundings. "I remember—the shack we hit for. That was last night?"

"Yes."

Borden felt of his bandages. Sevrance lay him back and commenced to remove them. He examined the wound. "All you'll need is rest," he reported, placing fresh cloth on it. "I'll promise you'll be on your feet again tomorrow."

"An' today," the foreman grunted, "I can still be hungry, can't I? I dunno how sick I'm supposed to be, but I could sure stow away some prime food."

Sevrance stood up reflectively. As a matter of fact, there was no food available fit to be fed to a man in Borden's condition. He needed excellent nourishment at this stage.

"It won't take long to rustle some," he said coolly, and went out.

There he called Muriel to his side and explained Borden's condition and his own intention. "You can fix up something for him that'll do till I get back," he said. "I'm going to scout down the valley and see if I can get some game. There ought to be plenty of rabbits, anyhow."

Her eyes clouded at his announcement. "Isn't there danger of meeting some of McQuirg's men down there."

"Very little. Besides, I have a gun. If there are any of McQuirg's men in the vicinity, I'd much rather meet them down there than up here." He smiled. "Though it's nice to have you afraid!"

Muriel flushed. "Perhaps—perhaps I was only afraid of being left alone," she said. "But—be careful, anyway!"

Turning, she hurried into the shack. Sevrance buckled on his guns, frowning at the blank doorway through which she had passed.

CHAPTER XVI

A Noose Swings

HE had small luck. It was cooler when he struck the rolling land at the foot of the trail, and a pleasant breeze rippled across the long grass of the valley. But a pistol he found to be poor armament for the scurrying wild things there.

Once he turned to orient himself and he saw the spur of rock behind which the shack lay. Against those white rocks even the wisp of smoke from the fire did not show. Sevrance noted that the sun was close to its meridian.

A small animal darted out from a mound of boulders which had clustered about a clump of bushes and trees. He brought up his gun and fired—unavailingly.

He smiled wearily. The sun was hot, in spite of the breeze; and he was

at the bottom of the valley. He pushed in among the trees and found a friendly rock. He threw off his hat and stuck the forty-five back into its holster.

Sevrance was hungry—and tired, too. He was dissatisfied and resentful. Through the trees his eyes studied the cleft in the ridge. Beyond that was Muriel.

His eyes clouded. He felt that, somehow, during the night, he had discarded one part of his character like an old cloak. He was no longer the man who had come, cold-eyed and unyielding, driven through Mestizo Pass with only the thought of vengeance! No longer the arrogant, self-contained Jim Sevrance to whom life meant a toss of Indian dice.

He had taken Muriel's safety and her happiness upon his shoulders. But it meant more than that. It meant renunciation of all his old principles.

And beyond that, it meant sorrow. For him!

He knew that. He remembered her eyes that morning, when she had been studying the look on his face. He was all that she had thought to see there—ruthless, cruel, dangerous. Life had moulded him that way. At this moment she needed these qualities in him—his coldness and his contempt for danger. But later—when the troubles in the Quicapos Valley were over, and her life was her own again—!

He would go away, his usefulness ended, and there would be a scar that McQuirg could not cause. For he knew that he was not for this girl.

He nodded softly to himself. He had just as well face it now, he thought. And then his eyes narrowed.

The sooner the thing was over, the better. McQuirg's gang had to be cleaned out, and his was the hand to lead in the cleaning. Sevrance started to his feet.

Oddly enough, he had no doubt of his ability to lead the ranchers. They had to be banded together and led against their will or with it. They would follow as other men in other lands had followed, once he set the example and stung them into action.

He suddenly stood frozen in his tracks. A harsh voice fell on his ears—from behind the rocks at his back——

"Hands up, Sevrance! Yo're covered by six guns!"

Whatever lay behind the command, he did not doubt its purpose. There was something familiar in the voice, too. Slowly his hands elevated and he turned about.

The muzzles of four rifles stuck out from the trees, all centered upon him. He saw two forty-fives as well, and he smiled.

"Thanks for the compliment," he murmured.

A curse answered him, and the bushes parted behind one of the revolvers. Out stepped—Vallance! Sevrance gave a start of genuine surprise. Vallance laughed bitterly.

"Didn't expect me, huh? Let's have them guns, amigo."

HE drew the pistol out of Sevrance's hip holster, and then, with a laugh, jerked out the one from under his shoulder. To the men behind him, he said—

"He travels heeled, this hombre. Come on out boys—he'll be quiet now."

Sevrance recognized one or two of the men who came out, but there were none he knew by name. They were a determined looking lot, and they kept their guns ready. None of McQuirg's crowd was there, though. He turned on Vallance.

"What's the idea?"

"I'm askin' all the questions!" the gambler snarled. "We been on yore trail, pardner, an' that shot o' yourn led us right. Wanted to get yuh before

the other gang did." He stepped back. "First yo're tellin' us where Miss Ferguson is—an' after that—yuh swing!"

Sevrance began to comprehend. He remembered that it must have been Vallance who had sprung out from the shadows behind the Square Deal the night before. He smiled bitterly.

"You damn' fool," he said, with quiet contempt. "Do you know what you're talking about?"

"I know what I saw," Vallance returned. "Neat game you was playin', Sevrance, but it's finished. Buffaloed McQuirg on one side, Sullivan on the other—an' me on the third. But I'm squarin' up for the lot. Where's Miss Ferguson—before yuh swing?"

"She's safe enough. Sam Borden's shot," Sevrance returned calmly. "Do you think, with six guns, that it'll be safe for me to let my arms down?"

Vallance glowered fiercely. "Yuh won't be uncomfortable for long, pardner," he assured him. "Come through —where is she?"

Sevrance could see the tortured fear in the man's eyes. He swept the circle of sullen, deadly-eyed faces, and he had no doubt that their intentions were complete. They thought that he had double-crossed them all and kidnapped the girl.

"Muriel's safe, Vallance," he said quietly. "She's up in the shack that Solo Pete built. Borden's wounded. But can't you see that I got her out to save her from McQuirg?"

The circle of cowmen closed in, and one of them swung a lariat rope meaningly. "We know yuh, Sevrance," he growled. "You wasn't friendly enough with Miss Ferguson for that story t' hold water. I heard yuh tell her an' the rest of 'em that yuh wasn't with 'em!"

Sevrance shot him a contemptuous look. "What of it?" he demanded. "Where were you heroes when she needed help last night?"

Their eyes lowered and there was an undetermined shuffle. But if he had stung them, he had also angered them. "Let's give him the rope," someone demanded.

"And quick!" Vallance agreed. "Sevrance, I'd like to give yuh a chance, but I don't believe yuh."

Sevrance's scornful eyes swept the circle. "You're sure a game crowd!" he told them. "Game enough to string up one man—alone! It wasn't so obvious when there was action, though, was it? If you hombres are so anxious to do something for Miss Ferguson, who's game to follow me into Ridoro right now and start cleanin' up?"

"Tricks," someone muttered, though some were impressed. Vallance shook his head.

"It don't go, Sevrance. We'll take care o' McQuirg, all right. But you've been talkin' too smooth for too long."

The rope swung nervously. The men moved toward him. He knew his last chance was gone. They had convinced themselves; they had got themselves ready for the showdown—only because of what they thought was his treachery. The first blood was to be shed which would whet their appetites for more.

But he kept his calm. To do otherwise was useless. It had already made an impression on them.

"Have you ever thought," he demanded, "of finding Miss Ferguson and getting the truth?"

The men started and looked at Vallance. He shot Sevrance a quick look; but his mouth was tight and cruel. Sevrance knew the agony he must have suffered in what he had believed.

The rope swung again, nearer. But before anything more could be said, the jingle of harness and the soft thud of hoofbeats broke in. The circle fell back and Sevrance whirled with the others as Muriel Ferguson brought her horse

to a rearing halt, her eyes sweeping the circle and taking in its meaning.

But before she could speak, Sevrance's eyes were alight and his lips parted in a swift breath. He was safe; but that didn't matter so much any longer.

What did matter was that she had ridden out to save him!

CHAPTER XVII

Marauders at Sunset Rancho

MURIEL FERGUSON turned to Sevrance, ignoring the others after that first look. "I was afraid of this," she said quietly. "Does it mean—?"

"You've just interrupted my hanging," he retorted gaily. "It was for abduction of you!"

Vallance already understood to what lengths his desire for vengeance and his hungry jealousy had forced him. He stepped back with clouded eyes. Muriel's eyes scorned him.

"You fools!" she cried. "Didn't he tell you—"

"But we thought—" someone began.

"You thought!" Her cold voice stung like a lash. "You were thinking of my safety again, I suppose! — while this stranger that you don't happen to like was doing the work!"

Vallance bit his lip. "If that was the plan," he said, "I don't see why he didn't ring me in on it. I proposed the same sort of stunt to him."

"I tried to get you, Vallance," Sevrance said quietly. "There were two men over you with guns, so I went on alone."

Vallance nodded unwilling acceptance. "All right," he said. "We'll all have to be sorry, Sevrance, and glad it didn't go any further."

"Yeuh," grunted the man with the lariat. "But now we're here and we've found Miss Ferguson—what next?"

They all looked to her. But instinctively she turned to Sevrance. He picked up his guns.

"We'll get Sam Borden," he announced quietly, "and get him back to Sunset. We can travel easy and he'll be able to make it. I don't think we'll meet a party of McQuirg's men who'll tackle us if we're together. And once at Sunset—we can start!"

Muriel nodded quick acceptance. Vallance was looking at her. Seeing the hungry, hopeless look in the gambler's eyes, Sevrance felt that he could not blame him for his vindictiveness. The poor devil was starving for a single word of approval from her lips.

With Sevrance doubling up on first one mount and then another, they reached the shack in the gully in less than an hour. There he saddled his own black and they managed to make Sam comfortable on a litter, improvised hastily. The foreman was greatly improved, but he was very weak.

"I didn't know what might be happening down there," Muriel told Sevrance quietly. "But I saw those men riding around just after you'd gone; and I think I must have had some presentiment of what might happen."

"It was a good hunch," he grinned. "They're out for blood, and I don't think they cared much whose blood it was. If we can only keep 'em in this mood—!"

"What do you mean?"

The men were filing slowly through the narrow place in the trail. Solo Pete's shack was alone again, as the old prospector had left it. Muriel halted and turned to where Sevrance was about to follow last into the defile.

"Mean?" "Just that. We've got to come to the final clinch with McQuirg right now—or not at all!"

Sevrance took a last look at the little open space among the huge white rocks. His father's place; one of the many stops along Solo Pete's hesitating way. It would hold other memories now, too, —for him. Solo Pete couldn't have known that when he built there. But Sevrance knew that, no matter what the future held, after he rode through Mestizo Pass when all was over—nothing could rob him of those few precious hours he had spent with Muriel there.

Borden was supported on either side by two of the punchers from the JC outfit, who had ridden out with their boss, Clarendon, on the girl's trail. Progress was slow. Sevrance trailed last, even after they were striking over the hills toward the ranches, until Vallance dropped out and fell in beside him.

THE gambler seemed to find it difficult to speak. His voice was husky and it held a defiant ring. "I'm still sorry about that, Sevrance," he said. "Maybe yuh can see my feeling's, though. If it'd been me, an' yuh thought I'd taken her, wouldn't yuh want to kill me?"

"Probably," Sevrance agreed coolly. "The only objection I have Vallance is that you lost your head. I'm disappointed."

"Lost my head? Good God, man, are yuh stone?" the gambler burst out. "I was crazy—mad! I've worshipped that girl ever since I first saw her, and I'd cut the heart out o' the man who harmed her. This isn't cards, Sevrance, nor guns—I love her!"

Sevrance looked at him with a puzzled frown. The man was distraught with his passion, almost trembling. The girl had practically ignored him since the scene. But he shook his head and his eyes fell to his pommel. He said no more. He rode on that way, dark and brooding.

They had gone in a long circle northward, along the upper slopes, in order to avoid Ridoro. Presently, Sullivan and another posse joined them. The story of the flight was retold. It appeared that the men from the ranches had split up to scour the countryside in a search for Muriel.

It was late afternoon when a thin spiral of smoke beyond a distant ridge announced that they were approaching Sunset. Approaching action, too, Sevrance knew. He had been hearing of the events in Ridoro since his unceremonious departure.

There had been no more votes for Sullivan. Henderson was sheriff by twelve o'clock and then things broke loose. McQuirg's men ruled Ridoro. Until dawn, inspired by the flaming liquor of the Palace, they had been hunting for any of the ranchmen still remaining in the town limits, wild at the thought of Sevrance's successful coup and anxious for vengeance.

"They've got a warrant out for yuh already," Sullivan said with a grim smile. "It's on a charge of abduction, an' there's nothin' funny about it. If they find yuh, they'll string y' up so fast you won't know it's happening."

Sevrance's smile was equally grim. "With the cards stacked that way, I stood to lose in either direction. Sullivan, there's only one way now and you might as well face it."

The old rancher nodded his head in grim silence and sighed.

The slow cortege continued. They were climbing the last slope now, at a walk. Borden was tired: he had overestimated his strength. The first of the riders crested the rise. Sevrance and the other jerked up in quick, wary surprise at the startled shout he gave.

Turning excitedly he yelled:

"There's a man at the ranch—they're drivin' out the hosses from the corrals!"

Without a word, Sevrance dug in his spurs and galloped up to where Muriel had just reached the cowboy. The others spurred behind them, an outflung, scattered line of fourteen men. Even Borden was sitting erect, grasping a pommel. They all came to a halt.

Below lay Sunset, wrapped in a golden gauze of late afternoon sunlight. A shot came to their ears, sharp and distinct. Men on horseback were dashing about the ranch grounds. Near the kitchen door there seemed to be some confusion. The gates of the corral were down and two riders were rounding up three last excited mounts inside.

"McQuirg's gang!" Sullivan breathed. "The devil's fiesta has started!"

Muriel turned a white face upon Sam Borden. "Tommy's there," she said. "Wounded. There's no one else but Hop Lee."

Borden nodded. "That's all," he replied, dry lipped.

Sevrance gripped his reins and raised them. Coolly he surveyed his companions, and his glance rested at last upon Sullivan.

"That's that. Are you ready?" he asked.

There was an instant of hesitation. Sullivan's gaze met his, steady, level. The old rancher inclined his head. The decision was made.

"All ready, I reckon," Sullivan answered steadily. "Come on, boys!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Riding Into Lead

THERE was nothing dramatic about words or decision. Yet Sevrance knew that it meant war to the finish. Before he started, he swung upon Muriel.

"Ride with Sam," he commanded. "Take care of him. Sunset'll be ready when you get there!"

She nodded, tight-lipped. Pistols were loosed, men leaned over their horses' manes. They started.

Like a rush of silent wind across the tall grass, the riders swept toward the distant ranch buildings. Nearer and nearer they came, without a single cry or shout to spur them on. It was a grim line in the growing dusk.

Nearer and nearer it came, until objects could be readily distinguished and Sunset lay at the end of the gentle slope just ahead. Sullivan was the first to free his gun and aim from the saddle.

The single shot cracked out venomously. It brought an instant halt to the activities at the ranch. Sevrance, riding low, tried to count the men there. He gathered that numerically the raiders were one or two less than his own band.

Sullivan's posse presented a wild sight as it pressed on. It was a deadly, outflung wave; something of the desperate determination of every man was marked upon it. The onward swoop had its psychological effect, too.

For the space of perhaps forty seconds, the raiders watched it, fascinated, while it neared with every hoofbeat. Then they broke. A wild cry came, a scattering of futile shots in every direction, and with one accord the men about Sunset hacienda turned and fled over the hills eastward.

Sevrance was smiling icily when he dashed first into the empty yard. He turned to Sullivan, who seemed highly pleased that the rout had been bloodless.

"They were the scum," he said succinctly. "McQuirg probably tossed 'em Sunset and the stock to keep 'em quiet, hoping they'd do some damage on the side. But we've only started."

He turned suddenly at Clarendon's pointing finger, just in time to see a

group of riders overtaking Muriel and Sam Borden. For an instant, fear clutched his throat. Clarendon's voice dispelled it.

"They're okeh. That's six boys from Dale King's outfit, an' the old man himself. They probably saw us headin' this way an' scented trouble."

Sevrance leapt from his saddle as a low moan fell upon his ears. He remembered the shot he had seen from the rise. Hurrying across the open space to where the veranda steps jutted out from the flooring, he was led on by the grunt of a man in pain.

Bending down, he made out a white huddle under the steps, a pair of soft-soled shoes. Clarendon was on his heels.

"It's the Chink!"

"Help, boss," groaned Hop Lee. "They shoot up—*muy* plenty."

A moment later, Sevrance was striding up the steps with the Chinese cook of Sunset in his arms. The quivering yellow man had a bullet through his groin and he had been struck over the head with a pistol butt. He was only partly conscious, giving little whimpering moans from time to time.

In the hammock, where Sevrance deposited him, Clarendon tried to bandage his wounds and clean them. One of the men ran out of the house with word that Tommy, Muriel's wounded puncher in the upper room, had not been discovered by the raiders, though the excitement had sent him raving with fever.

Sevrance turned from the groaning Chinaman, his face frozen, and surveyed the group on horseback which sat watching him in silence.

"The time to start," he said, with icy distinctness, "is right now. If we don't, McQuirg will. And if he makes the first move at this stage, its the finish!"

Sullivan's seamed face was drawn with anxiety. "What d'yuh suggest, Sevrance?" he asked.

"Starting immediately for Ridoro and cleaning out McQuirg and his gang with no questions asked!" was the calm retort. "Figure it over as long as you like, you'll see there's no other way."

Clarendon, a slightly younger man than the other cattle owners, looked up from the bleeding Hop Lee. "Put me down in favor o' that!" he said in a loud voice.

THE men stirred in their saddles, looked from one to the other uncertainly. They knew Sevrance had spoken the truth; yet this way was dangerous. It was hard to decide upon it cold-bloodedly, when no instant danger menaced them.

It meant facing McQuirg and the gunmen of Ridoro across the mouths of flaming six-guns. There would be no quarter. It had to be a finish fight—tonight!

They were brave enough. None of them had thought of hesitation when they saw Sunset endangered. In the face of any emergency to themselves or their own they would react instantly. But this was taking the offensive; and behind them, at the ranches, were homes and families. Those of the crowd who were single, simply cowboys and employees, had manifested a willingness to share in the fight.

But in spite of a few voiced agreements, hesitation continued. "Suppose we take a vote when Dale King an' his gang come up?" someone suggested.

Sevrance frowned. "Suppose we tell 'em, when they come up—that we're goin' down there!" he returned.

But he got no further. The quick, spiteful report of a rifle fell on his ears. Out of a corner of his eyes he caught sight of a stab of flame from the hillside. In the same instant there was a gasp—an unwilling groan.

Dan Sullivan slumped in his saddle, clutching the saddle horn. Someone

cursed. For a second a dead, palpitating silence fell. Then one of Sullivan's men spurred forward and caught his employer as he was slipping.

The silence was deadly, almost unbelievable, while two men eased the old rancher into the house. No one thought of moving out of range of further shots from the hillside. They simply sat there, staring. Two men came out a moment later. Sevrance turned, waiting.

"Right shoulder," one of them said huskily. "He'll live, I reckon, if we can get a doctor. It's near the lung."

Sevrance faced the men again, Clarendon beside him. His voice was low and tense:

"Well—?"

Someone voiced a desperate curse. "They got the Ol' Man!" cried one of the Z-Bar-Z boys. It was like a sob.

Sevrance glanced up and saw that Muriel and Steve, with the men from King's ranch, were nearing. He rushed down the steps, followed by those on the veranda, and leapt with one swing into his saddle. To the nearest of Clarendon's men he ordered:

"Ride out there and tell 'em what we're doing. Then send one of those men for a doctor!"

He accompanied the order with a slap of his quirt across the flank of the puncher's mount. Whirling his own black, he faced the anxious men. They seemed to take his leadership for granted. There was no more hesitation now. He sensed that.

He swept the bronzed, purposeful faces with a cold glance. Then—

"Come on!" was all he said.

There was no need for more. With one accord, as he whirled the rearing black, the line of men spread out and swung after him. No one thought to shout or cheer. The issue ahead was too deadly. From the slope beyond the ranch, King's men saw them start.

Sevrance rode in the lead, alone. He put his mount to a loping gallop and headed for Ridoro. Dusk had come, and the trail, hidden in chaparral and sage, was barely distinguishable. The men rode like a cavalcade of avenging ghosts, gray and indistinct in the soft purple twilight.

MURIEL saw the maneuver, as had the rest. At first, its meaning was not clear. They had only heard the shot which felled Sullivan. And then they saw the single rider from the JC streaking toward them.

The cowboy Sevrance had despatched, drew up with his animal sliding on its haunches, for instinctively King's men—even Sam Borden—had been hastening their pace.

"Send one o' yore men after a doctor, King," the cowman shouted. "Pronto!"

Instantly a man wheeled out. He asked a single question; the doctor was for Sunset. Then he was off. The rest encircled the messenger.

"They got Sullivan," he told them breathlessly. "Sniped him from the hill. And the Chink's all shot up. They didn't get to Tom—he's safe upstairs, ravin'."

"But where have they gone?" Muriel demanded.

Dale King leaned forward. He was a man on the youthful side of middle-age, good-looking and bronzed, vigorous and young from the life he had always known. King from the beginning had been arguing for strong measures against McQuirg. He was more impetuous than the rest and the reckless fire of youth had not begun to leave his dark eyes.

"They've gone to town," the cowboy answered. "That hombre Sevrance's took charge."

For an instant Muriel's eyes lighted with an eager flame. King approved

with a soft, "Good man!" Then he turned upon her.

"Muriel, your friend Sevrance'll need every man he can find," he said softly. "Sunset'll be safe enough for a coupla hours—McQuirg's goin' to be too busy somewheres else. I'm goin' to leave yuh with Sam till the doctor comes. Me an' my boys is goin' in."

She nodded and then caught the rancher's eye. He hesitated, before voicing the command to his straining men. Impulsively Muriel's hand fell on his and she gave a little smile.

"Jim Sevrance—he's fighting for us," she said in a low voice. "Don't let him get hurt if you can help, Dale."

For a moment King stared at her. Then he gave a short, understanding laugh. "The lucky devil!" he chuckled. "If he's got this kinda luck, Muriel, I don't reckon anything down in that town can touch him. *Adios!*"

With a swift pressure of the girl's hand, he wheeled his mount, waved his hat to his men, and they were off. A little cheer came as his cowboys fell in behind him. A moment later they were streaking across the hills toward the Ridoro trail.

Muriel and Sam Borden had halted. When the riders were gone from view into the purple shadows she turned a wistful uncertain smile upon her foreman. Borden was looking at her. He nodded solemnly.

"He's a durned good man, Miss Muriel," he sighed. "I wondered how long it'd take yuh to find it out."

CHAPTER XIX

Hell Breaks Loose

McQUIRG was furious. At the very outset, his reign in Ridoro had been challenged. The attempt to sack Sunset had been in the nature of a first move; he was prepared to back it up. And now it had failed—ignominiously!

He sat forward, back of the desk in the sheriff's office, which was lighted by a smoky oil lamp, his elbows on the desk and a black cigar bitten nearly in half between his fanglike teeth. Henderson stood behind him, the shining badge obvious on his vest. Across the desk stood Carver, his long hair matted over perspiring forehead and cheekbones.

"So y' turned back, you pack o' yeller hounds!" McQuirg spat out. "Why didn't y' stay an' fight?"

Carver shook his head and glanced nervously at his two companions: the Mexican Rogerio and another of McQuirg's bullies who stood in the doorway as though ready for flight.

"They was too many of 'em, chief. It'd 'a' meant a lot o' killin'. We thought it'd be best—"

"Killin'?" McQuirg's venomous voice dripped with contempt. "Who said to stop with killin'? There's goin' to be plenty before we're through. If y' think we get by by sittin' here quiet an' passin' out Sunday School tracts, you'd better hike through Mestizo before it closes!"

He jerked to his feet with an oath. His jet-black eyes flamed at the shrinking two-gun man.

"This is all they'll need to give 'em a little courage," he fumed. "We can expect some real trouble now—with that hound Sevrance loose again!"

"I tried to pot Sevrance from behind a tree," Carver faltered. "But I hit somebody else."

McQuirg's eyes lighted. He swung on Henderson. "Sevrance, eh? We've got a warrant for Sevrance—for kidnapin', ain't we?"

"Yeh, but the girl's back—"

"Who the hell cares!" McQuirg swore. "A warrant means the Law.

And it gives us the right to arrest Sevrance. He ain't gonna submit, is he? All right—ride out after him an' shoot up everybody with him on the grounds that they're harborin' a man wanted by the Law!"

Henderson's piggish eyes shone. Put that way, it gave him courage. His warped brain saw that the Law was his; that was enough. Naturally, the right or wrong would never be proved; Sevrance would die.

McQuirg was already issuing orders.

"We'll give 'em a showdown if they like it! They're goin' to be licked so hard—right now!—that there's goin' to be no more question who's boss in Ridoro. Henderson, get on over to the Palace and swear in every one of our men, in bulk!—as deputies. Then open up the whisky barrels and get the pigs in shape for a fight!"

CARVER'S eyes shone. "There ain't enough of 'em to stand us off if we go at it that way, chief—"

"Who said so?" McQuirg swung upon him contemptuously. "See what happened today? All Sevrance needs to do is show 'em how to fight an' this gang is licked. They're yeller, unless I keep 'em on top. That's why we're goin' to have it out right now, before the other crowd gets wise."

He motioned contemptuously to the door. "Get out! Try some rot-gut an' see if it gives *you* rats any guts!"

Glowering but silent, the three men slunk out and made for the Palace. It was a wild scene even before they reached it.

The whisky barrels had been placed on the bar and the bungs pulled. The liquid drooled from four spigots into eager tin cups. Men were shouting, swearing, vowing all manner of vengeance and blood. Tonight was to be the finish. Tomorrow Ridoro would be theirs and the wealth thereof.

Henderson administered the deputy's oath from the top of the bar and drunken voices roared a curse that promised they would become the guardians of law and order.

It was a devilish scene. Lighted weirdly by poor lamps, the yellow illumination fell across the flushed, unshaven faces inflamed with drink and saturnine with avarice. The moment was the beginning of a night of hell and fury.

Guns were waving promiscuously; shots tore into the ceiling, accompanied by bloody oaths and curses. The interior of the Palace reeked with raw liquor, tobacco smoke, and unwashed bodies. Fully twenty men reeled to the music of a nickel piano.

McQUIRG came in and surveyed the scene with cold, contemptuous eyes. Nevertheless it satisfied him. These men were ready for anything, once the spark was touched.

There was only one hazard. They must be let loose soon. Sevrance was a wary fighter and McQuirg had respect for him. Sevrance would know the psychology of that defeat of the afternoon. If he struck before this pack had taken the first offensive—

McQuirg's face suddenly went white. Even as the thought formed itself in his brain, the cigar fell from between his teeth. A single shot had been borne to his ears, a shot and a vague, unformed sound that might have been imagination amid all the noise and carousing inside the Big Horn Palace. He stood frozen for a moment against the wall. Then he shot a quick glance outside.

Nothing yet—but—that shot—!

He turned. His face was ashen as the thunder of hoofbeats came faintly to his ears. He reached the doorway, in the grip of cold fear. Another shot!

McQuirg knew then, without seeing. He made a wild dash across the room

and in a flying leap gained the bar. The room was silent with consternation.

"Quick!" he cried. "Get ready and fight, you swine! They're comin'. Everybody out!"

The wild-eyed crew stood stunned before the import of his words, frozen in the face of the agitation so plain in their usually impassive leader. Even Henderson could only stare vacuously, his big hands helpless at his sides. McQuirg's anger burst forth fiercely.

"Out, I tell yuh, you fools! They're comin'—*after you!*"

It was incredible, incomprehensible. The ranchers—their prey—coming after *them!* Their brutish brains refused to grasp it. And all the while, McQuirg's white-faced fear implanted deadly fear in their own breasts.

Thus the precions seconds ticked by until into the silence came the thunder of galloping hoofs. Thunder it was, the thunder of doom! It put indecision to an end. Someone cried aloud in alarm and terror. Henderson's piggish eyes lighted with the flame of an animal's, and he leapt from the bar.

Like a lash, McQuirg's voice cut and snapped at the heels of the men who jammed for the doorway, tugging wildly for pistols, scrambling for rifles, jamming and trampling each other and thrusting the screaming women from their path. They cursed and yelled and fired wildly—in one or two cases wounding their own companions.

"Out you rats, an' take it!" snapped McQuirg's vicious tones. "Take it or give it!"

It was a wild sight that met their eyes when the leaders of the rush brought up outside and recoiled in panic upon those behind them. Like a black cloud, Sevrance at its head, the ranchers swept down the main street of Ridoro. Their actual numbers were magnified in the darkness. They swept from one side of the thoroughfare to the other and apparently bore all before them. They came like a cloud, too, in silence except for the menacing thunder of those pounding hoofs.

Until suddenly the men pouring out of the Palace came in view, a helpless, struggling mass. There came a yell—a war-whoop—a sharp command that cut through the other sounds. And suddenly a sheet of flame, traveling with the oncoming riders like lightning across scudding clouds, burst like a wavering red tongue from one side of the street to the other.

Four of McQuirg's men dropped in that first volley.

The street was swept with the confusion of holocaust. The bolder of McQuirg's crew were attempting to rally, in desperation. Rushing out, they ran into the path of the oncoming horsemen, rifles and pistols jetting flame.

On came Sevrance, the men behind him. His pistol spoke twice. In the same instant, another hail of lead swept along the lip of that wave and three more of McQuirg's men dropped into the path of those merciless steel-shod hoofs.

Screaming, there was a dash for cover.

CHAPTER XX

Unholy Holocaust

PANIC had seized the rioters. The doorway of the Palace churned with struggling human bodies. Escape was the only thought. Gunsmoke choked the thick air. Sevrance's men had won before the battle had really started. Outnumbered as they were, the psychology of the moment was in their favor.

They did not even dismount. Sevrance halted before the saloon while the

mass charged past him. Straight through the doorway they swept, trampling the men tangled there. Screams, oaths and pistol shots shattered the night. There was no mercy, no thought of quarter; as every one had known this battle was to the death.

Someone flung a torch behind the bar.

Sevrance saw Vallance tear past him, his reins hanging loose, in the wake of one of McQuirg's men who was making for a horse at the hitching rack. Vallance tried to fire. His pistol clicked on an empty chamber.

An oath ripped out. The fugitive turned. Sevrance saw the gambler vainly trying to check the furious stride of his mount.

The other man's pistol was loose now; he was laughing insanely. Vallance swayed sidewise, attempting to fall into the dark before the shot could come. In that instant, Sevrance's pistol came up. It jetted red flame.

The gambler's mount reared. Vallance clutched at his pommel. The outlaw swayed forward, his pistol falling, and dropped. Vallance brought his mount to a halt at Sevrance's side. His dark face was streaked with perspiration and a smudge that was blood or mud.

"Good enough," he breathed. "I'll square that!"

He dove for the saloon doorway, through which the avenging riders had charged. They were fighting inside. Cornered, McQuirg's men were making a last stand behind the bar. They had taken shelter and the firing was mad. Suddenly, down the street charged another band, yelling and firing.

It was Dale King and his men.

They poured into the saloon. The confusion there increased. Sevrance's face was a set, hard mask. He prodded his mount and made a circuit of the place. McQuirg he had not yet sighted.

The fight was really over; but his own cold fury had not abated. There was still work to be done. A window at the rear of the Palace was shattered outward and two dark figures leapt through.

Sevrance's pistol was in his hand. He waited until he saw the two making for horses at the rear. Then he fired.

The first man cursed, spun about, and dropped. But his pistol was in his hand. Sevrance dove for him, his eyes blazing; and two bits of lead whipped past him. He saw the flame, but the turmoil drowned all other sound. His mount brought up.

Another shot came. The black screamed, reared; and Sevrance leapt from his back just in time.

Even as his toes touched, however, he had his aim. Two quick, vicious shots and his antagonist lay still, arms outflung in front of him on the ground.

Sevrance sprang across the motionless body and made for the second man, who had just reached his saddle. Now he turned, cursed in a foreign tongue, dug in his huge spurs and fired simultaneously. The shot went wide as the horse reared and started off.

Sevrance swore aloud.

"Rogerio! That Mex—*who knows—!*"

A second horse stood nearby. At a run, he leapt into the saddle, jerked the beast's head, and was off. The fugitive was just ahead, but he had got a start. Rogerio was headed out of town—probably for either the desert or Mestizo Pass. McQuirg's reign was over and the rats were deserting.

Sevrance reloaded his empty gun as he rode. No matter where Rogerio went, he would follow. Rogerio knew the name of Solo Pete's murderer—and this time—he'd tell!

If he had to drag the Mexican at the end of a lariat from Mestizo Pass to Ridoro, he would know that name. Sev-

rance rode far forward in his saddle.

BEHIND him, the sounds of battle rose and fell. At times there were furious bursts of firing; at most times the sound was a grim confusion. Then it died for a while, to become more evident a moment later, as though the fight had broken from the limits of the Palace and the last of McQuirg's men were facing the avengers under the stars.

The sky was a pale blue vault, and a cool wind rippled against Sevrance's face as he rode. He was overtaking the Mexican rapidly. Once Rogerio turned and fired at him, but his aim was poor, at that pace. The shot, and another to follow it, sang wild.

Sevrance held his ammunition. He did not want to kill his man; he wanted to get his hands on him.

Behind, the sound of battle grew louder. For a second Sevrance wondered if the tide had turned. Then he knew what the noise meant. The last of McQuirg's men was in flight, and the sounds were the sounds of pursuit.

He gave an icy smile. The moon came out. He could make out the way Rogerio rode now, his right hand on the butt of his revolver, so close were they. Sevrance's pistol came slowly from its holster.

Slowly, too, it was raised. The two beasts ploughed on through the tall grass. Rogerio had crossed the trail and then forsaken it. Now, in a panic, he was heading away from Mestizo Pass and making for the desert valley.

His pursuer's face was stony and set. They rode on. The sand clung now at their mounts' hoofs. Far behind them other horses pounded. Shots streaked in the dark. Once there came a scream of terror and agony.

Sevrance was close enough now. When Rogerio glanced fearfully over his shoulder, his smile was icy. Carefully he sighted, his left hand steadying him by grasping the saddle horn. Carefully his finger pressed the trigger.

Three shots streamed from the mouth of the forty-five. He lowered it. In the same moment, Rogerio's mount, with a scream, rolled sidewise and the Mexican plunged from the saddle head foremost into the sand.

One of the stray shots struck him as he fell. Sevrance jerked quickly at his bridle. He swept down upon the Mexican at a violent speed. Rogerio was trying to rise, tugging at his pistol wildly.

Sevrance swooped far out of his saddle, flung out his arms; a second later he and the Mexican came rolling and tumbling together into the sand.

His hand pinned down the wrist holding the pistol. His right hand was at Rogerio's throat. His eyes gleamed amber, flecked with reddish flame far in their depths. Rogerio was quivering with fear and pain.

"Now!" panted the captor. "Come through now, Rogerio—or you're going to die. And it isn't going to be a pleasant death. Talk!"

He was unheeding of the shots behind them, and of the nearing pursuit. It did not matter at that moment whether the horsemen were friends or enemies. His fingers dug like steel claws into Rogerio's skinny throat, and the helpless man gasped and choked with terror.

"I will talk! I will say—anyt'ing, señor. Anyt'ing—please—!"

"Talk, then!" There was no mercy in Sevrance's face, only the same cold fury. His fingers loosened only slightly. "Tell me who killed Solo Pete—pronto!"

"Aah! It ees that!" The Mexican was gasping. "Please, good señor—or I die—"

"Tell me!"

"Ah, *sangre de Dios!* You kill me. I will tell!" Rogerio's terrified, pain-ridden voice arose in a scream. "He

was kill' by—ah, McQuirg! Himself! He who is—*here!*"

Sevrance crouched, whirling with an oath as he grasped the meaning of the exclamation. In a flash he made out the figures of the three fugitives bearing down. In the same instant, though, he was aware of a striking spurt of flame and something burning seared through the flesh below his lungs. His eyes clouded.

Recognizing McQuirg, he swung about on one knee, fighting for strength. In the same instant McQuirg had seen him. The riders swung from their path, even pulled up in their mad pace.

As Sevrance brought up his gun, two more shots spurted out. Rogerio gave a little gurgling cough.

HE FIRED once—again. A curse ripped out, a quick command. They were riding for him. A gun was in each of his hands now, blazing. Jets of flame streaked from the blot that the trio of riders made—jets of flame like fireflies before his red-hazed eyeballs. On one knee he met them.

All over him were searing, stinging brands of pain. He coughed.

Agonized, Sevrance tried to rise and failed. Twice more he fired, weakly, and heard a shot—an oath commingled with a cry of pain; and he thought he saw one man fall. Blue shadows wavered across the moonlit sands, and everything was a blur.

He could not reach his feet. Something burned across his forehead and his sight was gone. Dully he pulled the trigger and then fell forward. Through the mists that swept over him, he heard McQuirg's voice, faint and faroff.

"That's that. Guess we got Rogerio by mistake!"

"Here they come—!"

"Ride, you swine!"

That was all. A few pistol shots that were probably only nightmares. Sevrance's throbbing body lay still. There were little spots of red on the sand which still retained the heat of the sun. McQuirg was gone.

A dead horse and a riderless one, three fallen pistols, emptied. A dead man and one in whom the spark of life still held. That was what Clarendon and a half dozen of his men found when they rode out on the heels of the fleeing McQuirg.

CHAPTER XXI

Out from Under

AEONS of time passed, eternities of swimming blackness. At long intervals a glimmer of consciousness and there were moments when Jim Sevrance knew he was not dead. But they were unchartered moments, part of the nightmare in which his burning body throbbed with pain, fleeting gleams in the dark.

Next a door opened and closed, softly. It was then that Sevrance realized he had been cool for quite a while, and that the pain was no more. He tried moving, conscious of cautious footsteps across a carpeted floor. But moving was an effort. His eyes fluttered open.

The room was strange. He had never seen it before. But the bronzed, homely face bent over him concernedly was familiar. Sevrance tried to smile at Sam Borden.

The foreman's features lighted, but they were apprehensive. "Did I wake yuh, pard?"

"No." The voice was very feeble. "You're all right?"

"Me?" Borden laughed. "Kinda plenty. How about you?"

Sevrance realized that those hours of darkness must have been long. Dimly he recalled the fight on the sands—Mc-

Quirg's face. His eyes closed for a moment. That had not been finished.

"I'm feelin' all right, Sam," he said. "What—happened?"

"McQuirg got yuh. He an' two of his men was runnin' from Clarendon's boys when they caught yuh with Rogerio. Thought they'd finished yuh, I reckon; but King said to bring yuh here."

"Here?" Sevrance opened his eyes. "I'm at—?"

"Sunset. Yeuh. Miss Muriel's been yore nurse. We didn't know if yuh'd pull through or not. Yuh'll be all right now." Sam looked complacent over a good job well done.

"I'll slope out, I reckon. Yuh gotta sleep."

Sevrance raised a feeble hand. "Wait! How did it come out, Sam? Did they get—McQuirg?"

Borden shook his head. "All but him an' two men. We cleaned out the town, all right, an' I'm the new sheriff. Henderson's dead an' what's left o' the gang is in gopher holes. I don't know if McQuirg made the pass; I hear it's plumb blocked up with snow. The stage's quit, an' once in a while a pony gets through with mail."

Sevrance closed his eyes. McQuirg had escaped—of them all! Weariness seized him. The job wasn't yet finished. There were whispers again, and soft footsteps. But he slept.

The next time he wakened in was with a curious racing of the pulses. Subtle yet certain, there was a strangely familiar scent in the room, a presence. He opened his eyes at cool fingers upon his forehead, and he was looking into Muriel's face. Instinctively she stepped back, her cheeks flushed.

Sevrance felt stronger. He smiled.

"So it's you?" was all he said, huskily.

"You're a lot better, Jim," she told him. "How do you feel?"

"Stronger. Fit, in fact. It was good of you to take care of me."

"No it wasn't," she said hastily. "Don't you realize you're the hero of Ridoro? It was a privilege. Everyone swore to pull you through. There've been five or six calls every day for two weeks!"

"Two—weeks?" he gasped.

SHE nodded. "You lost a lot of blood. Why, it's a day and a half since you spoke to Sam; you've been asleep ever since. But you're all right now. The fever's gone, and you may sit up when you feel able."

He glanced at the window, the shades of which were half drawn. A golden sunset was glimmering through. He felt Muriel's fingers in his, cool and small, and he felt oddly at peace. He was here and the worst of the fight was over. Muriel was here. She had attended him.

"Some day—everything—will be settled up—" Sevrance's eyes were closed and the words were a whisper on his parted lips.

Muriel bent over close to hear him. It was then that he heard the door open softly, and he turned. Her face was very close to his. His eyes could not leave it for a second. When they did, they were raised to Stephen Vallance, who stood there.

In the shadows in that corner, Vallance's face could not be seen too intimately. Perhaps it never changed expression. Perhaps it was only his eyes which made him look suddenly old and haggard at what he saw. There was real misery in his eyes; the hungry, hopeless jealousy that Sevrance had seen there once before.

He seemed the most discomfited of the three. "Sorry," he said. "They told me to come up."

Muriel got to her feet. "Why not?" she smiled, slightly flushed. "He's much

better, Steve. I'll leave you with him for awhile."

She went out. The door closed after her, and for an imperceptible moment Vallance hesitated, his eyes on the closed portal. Then he came and sat down on the bed, his gaze studying Sevrance carefully.

"Glad yo're better," he said. "I been up most every day."

"I didn't realize I was so important," smiled Sevrance. Then his eyes clouded. He did not know why, but sight of Vallance recalled another thought.

"Everything's all cleaned up, I guess," Vallance went on mechanically. He was still watching Sevrance.

"Everything—yes. All but—the big thing. You might as well know it, Vallance. Solo Pete was my father, and I've found out it was McQuirg who shot him. It isn't cleaned up—for me—till I've got McQuirg!"

A swift light leapt into Vallance's eyes at the words. But Sevrance was not looking at him. He said softly:

"Yuh'll want to finish that—alone?"

"Yes. Alone."

Sevrance was staring at the far wall, and his hands were gripping the sheets.

Vallance got up slowly. A calculating light was in his eyes now; a light that took in the tense fierceness of the wounded man, his intense purpose.

"I'll be slippin' along," he said. "And if I get news o' McQuirg, I'll let yuh know. I'll put out some wires."

Sevrance nodded. He went out.

Recovery was rapid after that day. Sevrance was eager and he had excellent care. He wanted McQuirg; that thing had to be finished, and he resented his weakness. But with a constitution that had never been abused, with his iron muscles and clean body, even his fuming impatience could not hold him back once he was on his way.

His right leg was still weak. But the rest of him seemed sound and whole. There were puckers in his flesh where lead had torn through, but infection had been prevented. He hopped about the grounds of Sunset on crutches and greeted good naturedly the friendly gibes on his invalidism.

He wanted to be away, though. Muriel's care was too sweet, her solicitude too wonderful. There were other, grimmer things to existence. He told himself that he dared not think of her—as he had that day in the western valley.

His life was not hers. His way was harsher, more bitter. Ridoro was at peace and he was a hero. But heroes, he told himself, last only a day.

On the day that he discarded his crutch and could use a cane, he hobbled down toward Cattle Creek. The scene had a fascination for him; it was peaceful there. It gave him strength, somehow, for the harsh task ahead of him somewhere.

Under the cottonwoods the sloping banks of the creek were cool, inviting.

The waters gurgled on pleasantly. He was minded to sit down, but he did not. How ironic, he thought, that in such a peaceful scene his thoughts should hold only vengeance. He studied it with brooding eyes.

"So it's here you've wandered to!"

He turned; his breath caught. Muriel stood just above him.

CHAPTER XXII

"Bring Him Back!"

HE HAD not been aware of the girl's approach. She stood framed among the parted branches at the top of the bank. For a moment they both were silent. To each had come recollection of their last meeting on this spot.

Possibly he could tell her now what

he had held back then. He put out his hand.

"Come here, Muriel," he said quietly.

She obeyed him, her eyes on his face. It was drawn and white, harsh, but tinged with an inward grief. She halted.

"I wonder why you come here, Jim," she said softly. "Does it mean something—that gold?"

"That gold?" His smile was twisted and fiercely bitter. "There's no gold, Muriel—no more than a thousand dollars' worth or so. All the gold dust that there is in Cattle Creek—*I put there!*"

She took an inadvertent step backward, her eyes searching his face as though fearful that fever had returned with his exertions. But his eyes were sane enough, even with the bitter pain in their depths.

"I put it there," he repeated steadily. "There never was pay dirt in this creek. Your father staked it out—I found out later—filed mineral claims here, when there was that first gold scare in Ridoro, years ago. I remembered that, but I didn't know this was claimed. But I wanted Solo Pete to find something, after all his searching, before it was too late—so I salted Cattle Creek. I intended to buy him out when he'd found his 'pay' at last, and make him come with me."

He stopped, his eyes questing for understanding now. "You see," he added softly, "Solo Pete was my—my father."

Her face was blank with surprise for a moment—then, with a rush, comprehension came. Everything became clear: Sevrance's mysterious arrival in Ridoro, his bitterness, his aloofness from the quarrels of the town until he had entered them for her sake.

She took a quick, impulsive step forward and her hands were on his shoulders. Her eyes were misty with unshed tears. There was a little catch in her voice.

"Oh, it's cruel!" she burst out. "The tragedy of it! I'm so sorry, Jim—so sorry for you!"

"Thank you," he said listlessly. "It's a little late, though, for even me to be sorry. There's only the awful irony of it. I tried to give him his heart's desire—what a fool men are to attempt to change destiny!—and I only brought him—the finish!"

"But he was happy, Jim," she protested. "You don't know how happy he was when he'd found it. Doesn't that mean a lot? Pete was old, anyway—I—I loved him, too. He was happy right to the end, for he'd found his pot of gold at last. Don't you see that it wasn't really the gold that mattered to old Pete—it was the finding of it! And you did that, Jim, and made him happy."

It *was* different. Sevrance realized that. The realization helped. Of course, it had all been cruel and needless, but he had made Pete happy. The old man had reached his goal before the end came and he had been content.

"Jim——" Muriel's arms were tightening. She was very close to him and her voice was tender. "Jim, will you realize that I am sorry, and that if you're hurt it hurts me, too?"

He looked down into her lovely, upturned face and his heart was beating wildly. The slanting sunlight made glorious coils of her hair. It was without volition that his hands reached up to catch hers, the cane falling unheeded.

"You're good, Muriel," he whispered huskily. "Too good—and kind. And your sympathy—" His hands drew away fiercely—"you mustn't let me mistake it for something else!"

RESOLUTELY he turned away from her eyes. Until her voice came again, a moment later, softer than before.

"If you mean love, Jim, I'm afraid I'll have to tell you. It's—that!"

His breath caught. "Muriel! You

can't——!" Then his eyes saw her eyes and his doubts fled. But the wonder of it overwhelmed him. "I can't believe it all, dear. Lord, it's too——"

"Too what?"

"Wonderful—impossible!" His eyes pleaded. "I didn't know what love meant until I found I could sacrifice in the hope that you'd find it. Muriel, that day up at old Pete's shack, when you saw my face—it was hard, cruel. I knew I couldn't have you. I frightened you then. In the meantime there has been need for hardness, ruthlessness, and you can admire it, perhaps. But I'm still the same man, and the Quicapos is peaceful now. Are you sure you'll never—be sorry?"

She shook her head. "You still don't understand, Jim, dear," she said. "It was because I didn't know you, that day. I didn't know what lay behind the harshness. And knowing now, I feel all your hurts with you. Isn't that love? I only know you're wonderful, Jim—a man I can trust always. Don't you see the difference—my darling!"

With a broken little cry he caught her close to him, his eyes closed in happiness. Her voice had trembled as she spoke and he could not trust his own voice.

He could only press his lips against her hair—more golden than all the gold of Sunset and the mountains, more precious than the diamonds for which he had fought. In the still shadows the stream gurgled on below them unheeded.

The clink of a rock and the creak of stirrup leather startled them a moment later, and they fell apart like two confused and guilty children. Looking up to the top of the embankment, Sevrance saw Stephen Vallance astride a horse.

No one spoke at once. Vallance seemed stunned. Then he attempted a lame smile.

"Howdy," he ventured. "I just stepped in the ranch-house to see yuh, Jim, an' they told me you'd strayed down here."

"Yes." Sevrance nodded. He was still bewildered; sorry, too—for the gambler. "We were going to walk back. Come along."

He picked up his cane. Wordless, Muriel went by his side.

Vallance led his mount, and he, too, was quite silent on that walk. They reached the ranch-house, and Muriel, with a little pressure of Sevrance's hand, turned and went inside without a word. The two men stood unspeaking for a moment.

The gambler cleared his throat. "Came to see yuh personal, Sevrance," he said at last.

Sevrance waited. "Still after McQuirg?" he pursued.

"Go ahead!"

Sevrance whirled upon him now. He had been recalling to himself that this thing must be attended to first. He had no right to the happiness that he had gained that day until justice was done. His apathy dropped from him. His eyes were dangerous again.

"Want him?" Vallance did not meet his eyes.

"You know that," came Sevrance's low voice. "I'll follow him right through the pass!"

Vallance bit his lip. "That's what I come about," he said. "If yuh wait yuh won't have to follow through the pass. I hear he's pretty well done in—blocked on this side with the snow—in that old relay shack up there. Only one man—wounded; your job, I reckon—and the snow."

Sevrance's lean frame tightened. Strangely enough, he had no suspicion of Vallance. There was only McQuirg—and himself. If he started now, he could wipe out the long score. After McQuirg, there remained nothing but the peace he had earned.

PEACE and sunset—and the gold of Sunset—

"The express rider came through. The stage is stopped, of course," Vallance was continuing. "He said he saw smoke in the shack, but he didn't dare stop. There ain't nobody in those parts but McQuirg, and there's no doubt that hombre yuh hit couldn't make it."

Sevrance's face was hard. The cane dropped at his feet.

"I don't want to say goodby," he confessed. "Tell—tell Muriel where I've gone. And that I'll be back."

He had forgotten his lameness. There was nobody around the bunkhouse. It was the work of only a few minutes to saddle a horse. In the bunkhouse he found a filled gunbelt and a forty-five, which he strapped on.

Then, his eyes hard, and his face set, with never a backward look, he got into the saddle and set out for Mestizo Pass.

Vallance watched him go. There was no satisfaction in his eyes. They held hunger, pain—a faint, struggling hope. He dropped into a chair on the veranda, his chin sunk on his breast, waiting. But it was late afternoon before Muriel emerged and found him there.

He looked up out of haggard eyes. Muriel seemed to understand that something was wrong. She gave a quick glance about her.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Gone." Vallance shook his head, watching her. "Mestizo Pass. He's gone for McQuirg, Muriel. I don't know if he'll be back."

If he needed further proof of what his tortured soul had already told him, it was in her eyes then. "You let him go?" she cried, and clutched madly at his shoulders as he got to his feet. "Stephen, go and bring him back, before—"

He stood staring at her. "Maybe—maybe he'll win through. Why don't yuh wait, Muriel—?"

"Wait?" she looked as though she thought him mad. "Shall I go myself or will you go? Can't you see that I love him—worship him? Dear God, if they should—"

Vallance caught her hands. The agony in his eyes went unheeded by her. His voice was heavy, broken. A fierce resolution had suddenly formed.

"I'll go," he said. "I'll bring him back, if yuh want him—like that—"

And whirling, before she could say more, he hurried from the veranda and leapt into his saddle. While Muriel watched, white-faced, he jerked hard on his bridle and tore from the yard. Then she was alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Last Ditch

SEVRANCE had not been aware of his utter weariness. All day he had ridden with his eyes fixed on the notch of the pass. It seemed to bear a significance. The end of his quest!

The night had grown cold even before he was higher in the mountains. His pace was so slow, due to the angle of the trail, that he was able to hold a blanket over his shoulders. Midnight had passed and he pressed on silently.

An hour later the cold was forgotten. He could glimpse the shack which had been built years before as a rest and emergency station for the stage crossing the pass. Smoke was curling from its chimney.

His jaw was set. He had no plan. There was only his mission to be accomplished, and consequences were not even considered.

Before he knew it, he crested the top of a sharp dip in the trail; and on the right of him it gave way. At the top of the next slope was the shack. There was

no smoke now, and no lights within.

Even as the whine of a bullet sang past his cheek, he knew that McQuirg had been waiting for him. Automatically he threw himself sidewise from the saddle with the sharp rifle crack. His blanket fell away. He understood.

McQuirg had known he would come, and he had seen him far down the trail!

His pistol was loose. He fell behind a stone that was not quite large enough completely to shelter him, and fired at where the first shot had come.

His shot served to draw a hail of bullets. From three sides they came.

It told him enough. McQuirg had placed his men well and they had been patiently awaiting his coming. Even the wounded man was shooting from the cover of the doorway, which was elevated sufficiently above Sevrance's position to be out of range.

Sevrance knew in the next few seconds that the tables had been turned. This was to be murder. McQuirg, filled with hatred, had awaited his vengeance. He had known that the ranchers of the valley were content with his exit from town. They would not come after him here—but Sevrance would! It was Sevrance who was responsible for everything; and before he went on, McQuirg wanted his vengeance.

Sevrance knew his position was untenable.

With a sudden jerk, he flung himself sidewise, heedless of the rattle of fire that the move brought on. He landed in a shallow depression. It was better shelter than the stone had been.

"Yo're goin' to last about five minutes there, Sevrance!" McQuirg's voice, cold and confident.

But Sevrance's only reply was to fire in the direction of the sound. This brought forth another laugh and a hail of bullets. The third man, he saw, was behind the gnarled stump of a dead tree on the farther side of the narrow trail. He took off his hat and awaited the next move.

Alone—almost completely at McQuirg's mercy!

How long could he endure the chilling cold, which was even now numbing his fingers? How long could he escape those singing bullets from every direction at once? The man in the shack doorway was still above him with a rifle. Any second he would get the range, and that was the finish.

A shot came from his left side, whizzing over his head. The man who had been behind the tree had moved. He was closer. He heard McQuirg's curses.

"Got your place, Martin?"

"Set, chief."

THE voice was very near, but Sevrance did not dare raise his head to ascertain its exact position.

"Good enough! Keep his head down. If he raises it to fire—plug 'im!"

McQuirg arose from a boulder's shadow. Sevrance brought up his gun, but a spiteful crack came just in time to make him duck, and the shot was spoiled. McQuirg was a hazy, wavering figure against the black rocks.

And now, suddenly, the finish was at hand. McQuirg was zig-zagging toward him. Sevrance fired vainly. His fingers were so cold he could not take accurate aim. The bullets from the left continued, dangerously close, and the man in the shack was getting his range. In the daylight it would have been over long since.

He pressed the trigger twice again—gave a gasp. The revolver was empty.

In the silence, McQuirg heard the futile clicks. "Get him now!" he cried. "He can't reload fast enough—!"

Sevrance worked wildly with his cartridges. He got one in the chamber. McQuirg was almost upon him. The second man was outlined against the trail.

The barrel snapped into place. One

shot—well, that must have its mission. Sevrance's lips were drawn back like an animal's at bay. Here was the end!

Then came a sudden clatter of hoofs—a startled curse. The two streaming red shots which streaked across the dark seemed all a part of the haze in which Sevrance was held fast, numbed and cold. He had a glimpse of a horseman on the rise above him. He saw the man who had been coming at him from the left totter and fall with a groan.

McQuirg brought up his pistol with a curse of surprise. He fired—once—and then two more of those red-mouthed charges flew from the man on horseback. Sevrance cried aloud just as McQuirg staggered to one knee.

The newcomer was Vallance!

McQuirg tried to fire again. Again those vicious red spurts of flame. The boss of Ridoro fell forward on his face.

Leaping to his feet, Sevrance cried out a warning. The man leaning against the doorway of the shack was levelling a rifle. Sevrance had slipped in two new cartridges. In the same instant that the rifle spoke, he fired.

The outlaw coughed, sagged. His rifle clattered to the rocks. But it was too late.

Sevrance was running toward the gambler as the latter slumped sidewise in his saddle. He fell into Sevrance's outstretched arms, his pistol still in his hand. Sevrance was weak. He had all he could do to break his rescuer's fall. They came down. The horse shied.

Vallance was shaking his head. "No use, pardner. It got me—here!" His hand was just over his heart, and blood was spurting over in little, dreadful jets. His face was graying, but he smiled.

"But why?" Sevrance cried. "Why didn't you take cover, man? They—"

"I didn't want cover!" Vallance coughed. He was dying fast. "I wanted this, and I—got it. I knew they were waitin' for yuh, Jim. And I sent you—hoping for—her, when yuh didn't come back. Then I found out. And I said—I'd bring yuh—back."

His head rolled back and his eyes were closed. Sevrance eased him, waiting for another word from those bloodless lips. The gambler's eyes fluttered open, his thin lips curved in a smile.

"It's even, anyway, Jim. You owe me—nothing. Only—I lied to Muriel. Said I'd *bring* yuh back. Don't tell her that I didn't—intend to, Jim. I came for this an' for you. That's all.—*Adios.*"

He had spoken the truth. It was the end and *"Adios!"*

PERHAPS Muriel understood when Sevrance rode slowly into Sunset the next day, alone. He had left Vallance's body in the village. It had been a hard ride back and he was weary. Muriel asked no questions, though. Women know things, somehow; and Sevrance, when he caught sight of her face, knew that he would never have to lie about that last scene in the icy shadows of Mestizo Pass. She would never ask.

He slid feebly from his horse. Sam Borden started for him, but Muriel was there first. It was a glorious feeling, to have her arms so close about him, to hear her soothing whispers of concern.

"You're not hurt again, Jim?"

He shook his head. "Not hurt. It's all over. Vallance finished it." He smiled a little. "I'm only—very tired, dear."

He had not been aware of how weak and exhausted he was until he walked, half supported by the girl, up the veranda steps and to his chair there. He had never been aware before of how wondrous peace could be—nor of what content was, until he knew she was by his side, his hand in hers, her soft fingers touching his pale face.

Peace had been won at a fierce price.

But Sevrance knew he had fought for the only gold of Sunset worth the winning. Solo Pete had shown him the way.

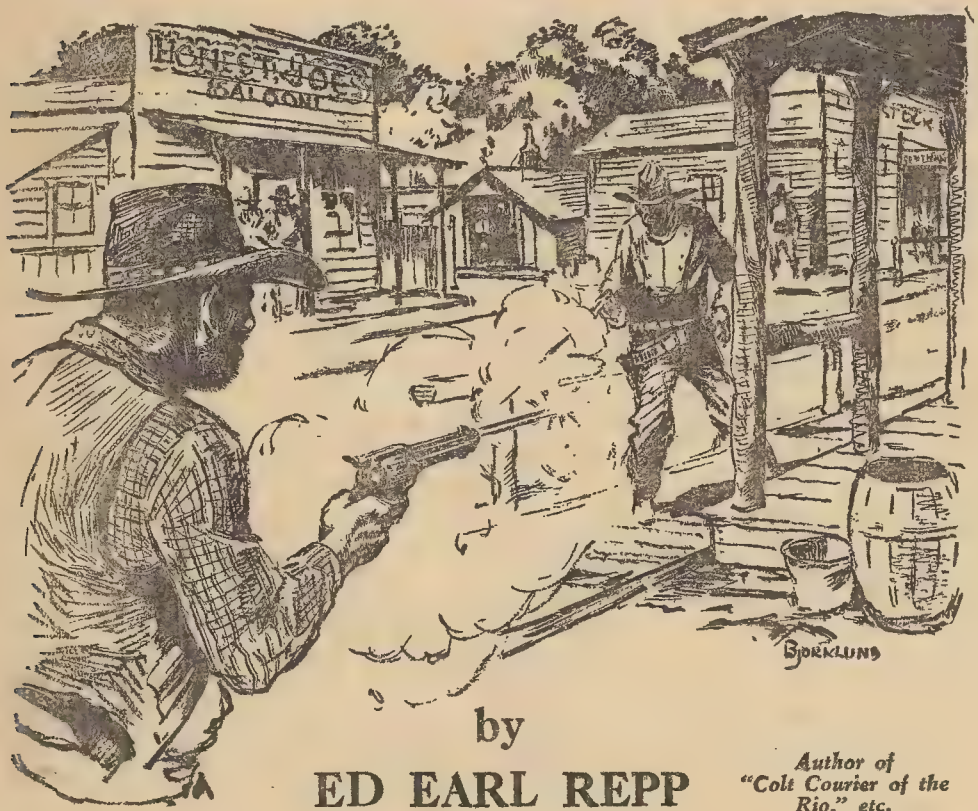
Gunman's Code

Driven to an outcast's fugitive trail for killing in self-defense, Bill Deever vowed to return and gain soul redemption—backed by hot lead justice!

THE early morning sun lent a false illusion of beauty to Redrock's dusty, false- fronted buildings, but the spring air carried a sharp, refreshing tang of pine brought down on the breeze from the scarps of the Washakies. A meadowlark, perched on a scarred and sagging tierack in front of the saloon, warbled gaily to a mate somewhere in the gramma beyond the town. The morning was such as to make the most bitter person forget a little of the bitterness in his heart. And young Billy Deever tried hard to shed the load of sadness weighing on his blocky shoulders.

With his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his ragged levis, he leaned against the grimy show window of the Redrock Mercantile Store, his nose flattened against the glass. He gazed admiringly, a little bit awed, at the pair of silver spurs glittering inside. A vain longing clutched at his heart. A faint smile turned up the corners of his fine mouth and then it came to him that he had almost forgotten how to smile. His pale grey eyes became softer than usual and his grin widened, revealing strong, white teeth. Someday he would wear spurs like those. . . .

While thus engrossed, a thundering



by

ED EARL REPP

Author of "Colt Courier of the Rio," etc.

voice sheered abruptly through his thoughts and he whirled half around to see Gus Andrews, owner of the store, bearing down on him, waving his hairy arms. "Clear out uh here, you. . . . !" Gus bellowed. "Do you think I want a no-good brat hangin' around runnin' business away? Or maybe you was fixin' tuh bust through that window, huh? Beat it!"

Momentary anger flushed Billy's face. He started to frame a hot retort, but thought better of it. He turned and shuffled away. The same old feeling of bitterness reclaimed him. The song of the meadowlark was lost to him now. He wondered gloomily why Old Gus couldn't have been a little less harsh. It wasn't doing him any harm to be looking in the window. His shoulders dropped and his look on life this bright morning darkened another shade.

Billy was fifteen and an orphan. He eked out a bare existence by working in the livery stable swamping the stalls. Most of the time he had pretty rough going. Redrock wasn't kind. Most of the citizens looked upon him as a ragamuffin and a no-good. Others ignored him and he reflected that he preferred to be ignored than cursed.

He was always ragged because his scant earnings did not permit the buying of many clothes. His battered range hat with a floppy brim sat down on his ears. A few wisps of yellow hair managed to escape over his left eye. He always wore an old .44 Bisley at his corded thigh. It was all his Dad had bequeathed him when he died.

With Gus's scourging ringing in his ears, he headed down the street and tried hard to forget. He even straightened his shoulders and imagined the few pedestrians were looking at him with admiration. He told himself he was good as any of them, even if they didn't think so. Besides, only Old Gus could be mean to him on a day like this. He heard the meadowlark's ringing call again and now he was trying to imitate its whistle.

BUT it seemed that fate was conspiring against this range urchin's attempts at gaiety. He was walking close to the wall as he hitched along under the awning of the Redrock Saloon, his eyes on the lark perched on the tierail. He wasn't watching the swing doors when they batted open suddenly, catching him broadside and knocking him flat on his back. As he got up, Billy glimpsed the man who had come from the saloon. Jake Banner was slat-like and his long, hatchet face was swart. Billy had never liked him, and Billy's long, steel-thewed fingers had often caressed his gunheel when he saw him. Now Jake was mouthing a vicious curse at him.

"Why the hell don't yuh keep outa the way, yuh belly-crawlin' scut?" and he kicked the youngster with pointed boot-toe. Billy's pale eyes became amber-hued.

"You ain't got no kick comin', Banner!" he said, brushing himself. "I didn't see yuh comin' out!"

"I'll show yuh whether I got a kick comin', yuh gun-totin' hellion!" Jake roared. "A no-good little tramp. Son of a drunken, thievin'—"

Billy's grey eyes became icy and hard. "Take that back, Jake Banner," he cut in harshly.

For an answer, Jake Banner dived at the boy, clutching him by the shoulder. He shook Billy brutally, then cuffed him on the side of the head. He released him and made another rush but Billy wasn't the kind to take a roughing without some pretense of fighting back. He let drive with a small, knotted fist and caught the man in the pit of the stomach. Jake Banner doubled up, clutching his hands to the point of the blow.

Now he dropped back a step and made a dive toward the holstered pistol

at his side. If he had intended to use the pistol to gun-club the boy down, Billy mistook his intentions. The .44 came up, belched flame and Jake Banner sprawled to the ground. Billy knew instinctively that the man was dead.

The battered, walnut handled gun in his small, weather tanned fist shook as he lowered it. A curl of blue smoke rose from the muzzle and Billy looked in horror at the thing he had just done. He hadn't intended to kill Banner. It all happened so suddenly that he didn't have time to think.

He was conscious of horrified gasps from the onlookers, Redrock citizens who chanced to be passing by. Men were running toward him and a crowd was gathering. It was Sheriff Sam Bellew who spoke first.

"What the devil?" he raged. "Why did yuh kill Jake Banner?"

"It was me or him," replied the fifteen year old boy simply. "Ask these folks. They saw it."

"Banner drew first," someone admitted reluctantly. "The kid cut him down."

"Maybe Jake drew first," another voice cut in. "But if he did, he had a good reason."

Billy turned a little pale. Whether it was from fear or from anger, he could not tell, but he always had the same feeling at the sound of that particular voice. It sent icy prickles shooting through his whole body. He didn't know why but it just affected him that way. He turned half around to look into the slitted eyes of Hodge Billings, owner of the T bar K, and a growing political power in Redrock.

"I did it because he was a no-account, dirty dog," replied Billy defiantly. "And not fit for the hawgs tuh associate with."

"I can't arrest yuh for shootin' in self defense," barked the sheriff. "But I'll be damned if we'll put up with this."

"He ought to be run out of town," came the suave voice of Hodge Billings. "That way, we'd be shut of him altogether."

"That's it, Hodge," exclaimed the sheriff. "Yuh've hit it." He turned to Billy. "You're no better than your Paw was, kid. He'd have died at the end of a hangman's rope if a mean hoss hadn't beat him to it. Pack up and leave. Redrock don't want you or your kind."

"Yuh do make it easy on a fella, don't yuh, Sheriff," bit off Billy sarcastically and moved away.

He was conscious of hostile glances from the crowd as he turned his back on them. He knew the contempt that was behind those glances. He had been a no-good before. Now he was a killer and an outcast among men. People were quick to condemn. They didn't go to the bottom of things. They just took them for what they were on the surface and let it go at that.

With fresh bitterness rising in his heart, Billy Deever saddled his zebra dun pony, packed his meager belongings, and left Redrock in the direction of the setting sun. Even though a deep feeling of loneliness coursed through him, he wasn't sorry that he was leaving. A little way out of town, he turned and looked around.

"I'll be comin' back," he stated in a low and grim tone. "Yuh run me out this time. Next time yuh'll be lickin' my boots."

LIFE hadn't dealt gently with Billy Deever. From the day of his earliest recollection he couldn't remember when Redrock had been kind to his father. Tom Deever was a wild one, he was gruff in his ways, but underneath the rough exterior was a goodness and kindness to those who deserved it. And he had been Billy's one and only friend. Billy never knew his mother and he had heard people say that it was her death

that sent Tom Deever on the downward trail.

Billy couldn't see that he had gone on the downward trail but he figured maybe in his love for his father he had overlooked the fact. He only knew that it was tough sledding for Tom on the Rafter S, which adjoined Billings' T Bar K on the eastern slope of the valley. There were times when Tom Deever cursed Billings and other Redrock citizens soundly and often he came home drunk. He was never mean to his boy at those times and the youngster knew that if he wasn't mean when he was drunk, he wasn't a bad sort.

When Tom was killed, Sheriff Sam Ballew told Billy that it was a mean horse that killed him. Jake Banner said it, too, so did Hodge Billings. They were the ones who found him trampled to death. They found bits of clothing on the hoofs of Tom's personal horse. Billy didn't see how it could have happened because he had never known the horse to be mean. But the evidence was there so there wasn't much denying it.

Bill was forced to leave the Rafter S then. He was so young that he didn't understand mortgages and loans but he understood that the ranch no longer belonged to him. He did know that shortly afterward T Bar K cattle were running on his father's spread. Billy was thrown on his own after that and was able to find a scant living in the livery stable. At least he had worked there until today. As he jogged along through the waning afternoon he reflected bitterly that it didn't make much difference where he went. One place was probably just as bad as another.

BILL DEEVER never stayed long in one place after he left Redrock. He drifted from town to town, from ranch to ranch. He held various jobs but a few weeks or days here and there and he was on the go again. He worked hard and diligently and it was always with reluctance that his employers let him go. Each time he took a job he told himself that he would stay on, but always it was the same thing. He became restless, discontented and went on his way. In time he knew all of the trails from Montana to Mexico.

At twenty-one, there was little to identify him with the lanky youth who was kicked out of town by Sheriff Sam Ballew. Six years had added many inches to his height and filled him out to full proportions. His muscles were long and sinewy beneath his heavy flannel shirt and his chest was thick.

His raiment and riding gear was a sharp contrast to the rags and poor equipment he had known as a boy. His Stetson and his bench made boots were of the finest and his silver mounted saddle and spurs had cost many thousand pesos below the border. The only parts of his equipment that were not new were his guns. He still carried the battered Bisley on a belt around his lean hips and another one nestled in its holster on the opposite side.

He acquired proficiency with those guns. Long hours of practice made his draw a marvel of perfection. Every part of it, every motion, was made a work of precision. Yet no man had died in front of those blazing guns since the day he left Jake Banner sprawled in the street in Redrock. He acquired his gunswift for the day he would need it as he knew that the day would surely come. Bill Deever's code was not that of man made law. It was the law of the fang; dog eat dog and the devil take the weakling.

Bill Deever was a killer because he had once killed a man in self defense. It showed in his steel grey eyes; in his hard face that was rarely creased in smiles.

It was of a sudden that he knew the time had come for which he had been

waiting. His preparations were complete. He had power, money, gunswift. He had made a promise once and it was now time to fulfill the promise. He was going to return to Redrock.

BILL DEEVER had left Redrock in the direction of the setting sun. Now, six years later, he was riding into the sprawling cowtown as the fiery ball in the heavens rose toward its zenith. It was early summer and the atmosphere was peaceful but had the bustling of early morning activity. People were hurrying along the streets and a few buckboards creaked along the dusty roads.

The place was the same except that the board-fronted buildings seemed a little more battered and weatherbeaten and the streets a little more rutted.

He wondered if Sam Ballew was still sheriff and if Hodge Billings was still there. He cursed silently as he thought of them and then he hoped that they were. It would be fun to unlimber a few shots and watch old Sam come running just as he had the last time.

He turned the corner into the main street and a sudden light of interest came into his lustreless, grey eyes. A group was forming at the other end of the street and was growing all of the time. Bill raked his pony lightly and the horse broke into a light trot toward the scene of the excitement.

Bill pulled up just outside the ring of curious townspeople and sat atop his mount to watch the proceedings. He was watching totally from an outsider's point of view. A man was a fool to get into trouble where he wasn't invited. He had learned that a long time ago. He thought of the close parallel of this case to his own, six years ago. He had been the center of attraction then.

There was only one difference. This time one of the men on the inside of the circle was an oldster and he had been a button then. The other man was a squat hombre, a gunman, the same type as Jake Banner. He was mean looking as hell as he stood menacingly before the old man. His thick lips were curved in a sneer and his thumbs were hooked in his gun belt.

There was no fear in the small, beady eyes of the old man. Bill recognized him as the owner of one of the smaller ranches in the valley. He didn't know him very well because the oldster didn't come to town often. Now his iron grey moustache bristled defiantly and he didn't flinch under the menacing look of the burly man.

"Ace Kilgrow," he spat. "You're a low-down, yella-bellied cur or my name ain't Dad Parker. You're no better'n your boss. Just a gun dummy, yuh—"

"Back up them words with gun-talk," snarled Ace Kilgrow. "Go for your iron, old man."

"Hell, Kilgrow," shot back Dad Parker. "You know you could beat me to the draw. That's why you're so anxious for gunplay. I ain't givin' you the pleasure of shootin' me."

Bill Deever felt sorry for the old man. If Kilgrow goaded him into a gun duel, he wouldn't have a chance. But that was his worry. If the old fool didn't have sense enough to stay out of a fuss it wasn't Bill's lookout. He didn't make a practice of horning into other men's fights.

"Why you old broken down piece of crow bait," growled Ace Kilgrow in answer to Dad Parker's last remark. "If yuh ain't got sand enough tuh use your cutter, I'll have tuh use some other way to shut you up."

Without a warning, his hairy fist shot out like the head of a coiled rattler. Dad Parker didn't have time to dodge the blow and it was unlikely that he could have dodged it had he been prepared. Kilgrow's knuckles struck the old man squarely between the eyes and

he dropped like a pole axed steer.

Bill Deever winced. This was cold blooded slaughter. In his short and stormy life, he had been closely associated with brutality and life at its rawest but he still didn't like this. There wasn't even a trace of equality in the fight. Bill cursed the luck that brought him into Redrock at this particular time. He had to make himself a damned yellow bellied coward in his own eyes now or get into a lot of trouble. And he wasn't ready for trouble yet. This Ace Kilgrow didn't mean a damn thing to him. He grimly resolved to stay out of the fight.

The blow from Kilgrow dazed Dad Parker but it didn't put him out. Groggily, he got to his feet and when his head had cleared for a moment he charged again at his assailant. Kilgrow was prepared for the onrush. He set himself and swung again. There was the sickening thud of flesh meeting flesh and again the oldster fell flat.

By some superhuman effort he pulled himself up again. Bill felt a strong wave of admiration for the plucky oldster who was rising time and time again in the face of unbeatable odds. It took nerve to do that.

Ace Kilgrow's sledge hammer blows beat the aged man down again. He made another feeble attempt to rise but it was of no use. He dropped back to the ground and lay still.

ORDINARILY, a person would have said that the fight was over then. Ace Kilgrow did not figure it as such. When he saw that Dad Parker was not going to get up and rush him again, he strode over and with a wicked thrust of his boot, he kicked the heel straight into the stomach of the prone man.

Bill Deever felt sick. This was the most inhuman thing he had ever witnessed. Ace raised his foot again and Bill quit his saddle in one leap.

He hit the ground running and before anybody could figure what he was doing he was pushing men aside to get to the center of the ring of humanity. Surprised and frightened looks were thrown in Bill's direction. This was an entirely new angle on the fight. Kilgrow was pulling up his foot for a third kick at Dad Parker when Bill Deever caught him by the collar and whirled him around.

The squat gunman whitened a shade at the sudden intrusion and as his eyes met the cold, deadly ones of Bill Deever, he snarled, "What the hell you hornin' in for, fella? This ain't your fight."

"If yuh want to fight him while he's standin' up," rasped Bill, "that's all right. But I figure a fuss is over when a man's down."

"One of these guys with big ideas, huh," sneered Kilgrow. "Always takin' the part of the underdog. You oughta get 'em outa your head. They ain't healthy."

"That's it, if yuh want to put it that way," said Bill quietly. "Anyway yuh say it, it all adds up to the same thing."

With a violent twist of his body, Kilgrow wrenched free of Bill's grip. He drew back a step. "Maybe you'd like tuh take it up," he snapped and lunged at the younger man.

Bill wasn't entirely unprepared for the onslaught but even as he ducked, Kilgrow's knotted fist grazed him on the cheek. He felt a sudden slash of pain but that didn't upset him. Coldly, he calculated the position of Kilgrow's jaw and sent a rocking blow toward it.

The gunman fell back under the force of the impact. He almost dropped to the ground but caught himself with his arm, righted himself and made another charge. This time he didn't even connect with a blow because Bill's jarring fist caught him as he lunged. Now Bill waded in sending lefts and rights.

They weren't fast and furious but each one was deadly and well timed and had the force of a blacksmith's sledge.

Ace Kilgrow was too dazed by the assault to even begin a counter attack. He backed away with Bill following him every step of the way. He tried to cry out but his cries were smothered by the blows. Finally Bill knew that Kilgrow was going down. The man was staggering, reeling. Bill never faltered in his deadly attack. The onlookers were agape, completely awe-stricken. Ace Kilgrow had shown no quarter toward the old man but this was the most merciless thing they had ever seen. Bill Deever was literally hammering his opponent to pieces.

Kilgrow reeled backwards until his legs could no longer carry the burden of his weight. They bent like rubber and folded under him. He slumped to the ground and lay still.

Bill turned slowly toward the prone form of Dad Parker and he was aware of somebody pushing through the crowd. He had not taken more than a couple of steps when he was met by an angry, red faced man. It seemed at that moment that time had suddenly rolled back six years. Here was the same scene with a man sprawled in the dust. The same sheriff with the same goat whiskers was bellowing at him.

"What the hell?" cried the sheriff. "What's the meaning of all this?"

"Just a little difference of opinion, sheriff," Bill drawled easily. "That's all."

And when Bill turned around he knew that he was going to look again into the slitted eyes and impassive face of Hodge Billings. Billings had pushed through the crowd quietly and unanounced. That was the way Billings always did things. Bill Deever remembered that now. But Bill didn't flinch or turn pale under the cold stare. The faintest trace of a smile flitted across his tight drawn lips. He was wondering if they would try to run him out of town again.

Now Sheriff Ballew raged again. "Hell, man. Yuh didn't have to beat him to death."

"He ain't dead," said Bill. "He'll come outa it after while."

"Maybe Ace had it comin'," Hodge Billings cut in. "Maybe he tromped on the stranger's toes."

Bill saw the T Bar K owner cast a dark look at the sheriff. Sam Ballew turned away. "Maybe you're right, Hodge," he blustered. "I guess that's it."

THE two men trailed back out of the crowd. Bill watched them go and mentally he made a note of the difference from the last time. He was a kid then and they ran him out of town. This time he was their own size and had proved to them that he was a man of their equal. They had let him alone. He smiled contemptuously after them.

When Hodge Billings and the sheriff were gone, he picked up the unconscious oldster and threw him across his shoulder. He moved to a horse trough on the other side of the street. The curious glances of the onlookers followed him. When he reached the trough, he lay Dad Parker down gently. Then he took his bandanna handkerchief and began to wash the dirt and blood from the oldster's face.

After a few minutes the old man began to show signs of life. He stirred feebly at first but later opened his eyes and with some effort, lifted his head from the ground. Bill got the canteen from his saddle and gave Dad Parker a little water.

The water seemed to freshen him considerably. Finally his eyes were opened enough that he could focus them on Bill's face.

"Who the hell are you?" was the first thing he asked.

"Just a stranger," Bill replied. "That can't stand tuh see a fella get kicked in the belly after he's down."

The old man's head had cleared sufficiently for his thoughts to become coherent. "Where's Kilgrow?" he demanded angrily, trying to rise.

"Never mind, old timer," said Bill, putting his hand gently to Dad Parker's shoulder. "Kilgrow won't bother you for a while. You need some fixin'. I'm takin' yuh to a doc."

With his strong arm steadying the wounded oldster, Bill made his way down the street to the doctor's office. When the little, bespectacled medico had finished bandaging Dad Parker's cuts and bruises, he left the inner office. The old man needed rest before he could leave, so Bill remained with him.

"Younker," said Dad Parker while they were talking. "I ain't one tuh slop all over with sentiment but I am grateful to yuh."

"Ain't nothin' more than anybody would have done if he had any sand in his craw," said Bill. "If it ain't too personal, what was the fuss about in the first place?"

"It's a long story, son," Dad Parker told him. "First thing, the fuss wasn't with Kilgrow. It was with Billings."

"An' Kilgrow does the dirty work?" asked Bill.

"That's about it," said the oldster. "Billings is an ambitious cuss. I got a little spread that set between two parts of his land an' it's a thorn in his side. He wants it and he usually gets what he wants."

"What about the sheriff?" Bill asked him. "And the rest of the folks here? Don't they do anything about it?"

"Hell!" snorted Dad Parker. "Sam Ballew is a doddering old fool that can't see anything if it's on the end uh his nose, an' the rest of the people are like a bunch of wall-eyed sheep. They don't see nothin' unless it concerns them. Billings is a smart critter an' don't do anything tuh get the general public riled at him. Those that do get in his way he takes care of kind uh private like."

He stopped for a moment and Bill was watching him closely. The expression that crossed his leathery face was one of bitterness, mingled with disgust. "I reckon I'm about as bad as the rest uh them as far as bein' a sheep is concerned," he said. "I watched Billings take care of a fella that got in his way once an' didn't do nothin' about it. Fella by the name of Tom Deever. Figured it wasn't none uh my business."

Bill gave no hint of the surge of emotion that coursed through him. His features remained impassive. "What about that fella?" he asked casually.

"Tom Deever owned the Rafter S," Dad Parker went on. "An' Billings wanted it. Tom was pretty much of a heller but not a bad sort. Anyway he's in town pretty well loaded with red eye an' starts out for his ranch. Billings an' one of his gunnies Jake Banner was his name, waylay Deever and gun him down in cold blood. Then they run Tom's own horse over him tuh make it look like the horse tramped him tuh death. Course everybody believed it an' they let it go at that. I didn't have no hankerin' tuh get into trouble with Billings so I kept my mouth shut. Tom Deever's kid cut Jake Banner down one day in the street so he kind uh halfway got revenge, though he never knew that he was gettin' it. They run the kid outa town."

BILL'S grim features remained as immobile as granite during the whole lurid story of the death of his father. With this startling revelation a slow fire of hatred was kindled within him. It grew and each thought fanned it to a brighter intensity than before, until it rose to a white heat. It became all-

consuming and Bill knew now why he had always hated Hodge Billings. It was as if in his subconscious mind he knew instinctively that Billings had been Tom Deever's murderer. This revelation by the old man was only part of the slow workings of the hand of fate that was leading him to his revenge.

Bill rose, and stared unseeing across the room. Dad Barker noted the strange transfiguration and remained silent. Then, without a word, Bill left the office.

With heavy strides he emerged to the board sidewalk and his boot heels echoed hollowly in rhythm with the slapping of the holsters against his sides. Small knots of townspeople were still clustered on the street and all eyes turned to Bill as he made his way boldly toward the Redrock Saloon. They saw with awed curiosity the grim set of his features but he did not see them. He walked like a man in a dream with his eyes fixed on his objective and that lay dead ahead.

At the saloon he brushed the batwing doors aside and strode boldly in. It was a few seconds before he could accustom his eyes to the dim light of the room but he went on in measured tread toward the bar. A few men were gathered there and they turned at the intrusion. Billings was pouring a drink and he stopped with the bottle poised in mid-air. Ace Kilgrow had dragged his beaten hulk into the saloon and was trying to regain his composure with alcohol. There were others around Billings; Bill counted five that he knew to be hard-eyed gunmen. Patently Billings men. All would probably shoot at the drop of a hat.

Seven gunmen that Bill could be sure of, and he didn't know how many more. He wouldn't have a chance in hell against all of them but one thing was certain; he could get Billings first. He didn't care what happened then. He stopped a few feet in front of the knot of men.

It was Ace Kilgrow who broke the silence first. "You've got a lot uh nerve comin' in here," he snarled. "After what happened. If yuh was smart you'd be slopin' for parts unknown. Redrock ain't a healthy place."

"I'll take a chance on my health," Bill shot at him. "I didn't come to see you anyway." He turned to Hodge Billings. "I want tuh talk with you, Billings."

Hodge Billings maintained his calm manner. "Why sure, stranger," he said easily. "You want to talk here or would you like to talk privately? Say in my office."

"Here will do," rasped Bill. "And perhaps I'm not as much of a stranger as you think." A grim smile flitted across his hard lips.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, young fellow," said Billings. His eyes drew down to finer slits.

"We have quite a bit in common, Billings," Bill went on. "Say the Rafter S, for instance."

"And that means, what?" asked Billings quietly.

"It means I'm Deever's kid," grated Bill harshly. "That means something to you, don't it, Billings?"

"No, that don't mean nothin' to me," said Billings. "It just means—"

Hodge Billings' hand had edged toward his gunbelt while he was talking. Now, in one swoop it darted holsterward. Bill had seen the movement from the first and he drew when Billings' hand touched the gun butt. The T Bar K owner never got his weapon clear. Both of Bill's guns were up and bucking in his hands. Billings was the first one to fall and he slid to the floor, his feet sprawled out in front of him. He was dead when he landed.

The first shot had been the signal

for simultaneous action by the other six. Ace Kilgrow, in spite of his wounds, was still able to handle a gun. He never handled it for long as Bill's third shot took him in the head. The one shot that he was able to fire, went wild.

The saloon rocked to the concussion of gunfire and acrid powdersmoke vapors filled the room. Bill went to one knee and he felt a slug tear through his shoulder, another through his thigh. Bill was oblivious to all this as he triggered his guns and leaden death belched from their muzzles.

HE saw Billings' gunmen go down around him and it seemed incredible to him that his two guns could do so much damage. Now there was only one left and Bill threw his forty-four toward him. The gun roared but the man had pitched forward an instant before he fired. Bill whirled to see where the last shot had come from. His jaw dropped in amazement.

Sheriff Sam Ballew was squatted halfway back toward the saloon door. Blue smoke circled upward from the muzzle of his revolver as he ejected empty shells from the chamber. Now he got up and walked toward Bill. The younger man found that he was able to rise and got up.

"Looks like yuh polished 'em off in good style," said the old sheriff, his chin working up and down.

"Looks like I had a little help, too," said Bill still puzzled at the aid from an unexpected quarter. "Though I still don't know why."

"Well," said the old sheriff. "I found out yuh was havin' trouble so I didn't want a fella that I was goin' to have for deputy tuh go and get himself shot."

"Deputy," Bill shot back. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm gettin' pretty old," said Sam Ballew. "An' I need some help. Figgered on appointin' you."

Bill's features became hard. "Maybe if yuh knew that you run me out of town once, you wouldn't be so set on appointin' me."

Sam Ballew's face became serious. "A man makes mistakes sometimes, younker," he said. "I did an' I ain't afraid tuh admit it. Old Dad Parker told me the story. He told me you was Tom Deever's kid. The town was pretty rotten to yuh, son. But they'll try tuh make it up. I'll assure you of that."

Bill became thoughtful. He was tired of drifting and Redrock was his town. It always had been. He was born out on the Rafter S and some day he would go back to it. He knew that. He knew also that Sheriff Sam Ballew was sincere in his assurance that Redrock would treat him with respect. His bronzed features creased in a smile. He put out his hand and took that of the sheriff's.

"I'll take that deputy's job," he said.

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Bounty for an Outlaw

by LUKE TYLER

Author of "The Gun-Prodigal Returns," etc.

THE moon was coming up, and "Stub" Ashton was far from the bunkhouse of the VG-Bar. Stub had been looking for strays since late afternoon and had quite lost his bearings in the quest. Now, he fondly hoped, he was heading back to the main ranch buildings. Stub was a new hand on the VG-Bar; the country was not familiar.

"No matter where the wanderin' bovines is tuh-night I'm lettin' 'em wander!" he grunted. "Peepin' prairie dogs! But I would sure delight tuh be fastenin' molars in a slab uh steer right this minute! Though I reckon I'll be plum' lucky tuh get any chuck whatever!"

Some distance to the left he could discern an irregular, rocky formation which seemed to stretch for miles.

"Must be around here abouts Bottleneck Gulch begins," reflected the cowboy. "Five or six miles north uh the ranch, Harkins said. All right, hay burner! I'm goin' tuh light me a smoke and then shove hard on yuhr reins!"

Stub Ashton got the idea to plan some of his own brand of rustling, after that owlhoot stranger fogged in from the dark trails to warn Ashton he was one mean hombre when crossed!

Stub struck a match and applied the flame to his cigarette. As he tossed the extinguished sliver from him he was surprised to see another match flare in the shadow of the butte to his left. A moment later a tiny red spark described two arcs in the air. It appeared as if someone were signaling with a cigarette end.

"How intrustin'!" Stub observed. "Mebbe I better answer."

Twice he swung his own cigarette in a circle. Almost immediately came the beat of a horse's hoofs. The unknown was riding toward Stub Ashton. Slowly the cowboy's right hand dropped to his gun butt, rested there.

A small cloud obscured the face of the moon and temporary gloom succeeded the cold brightness. Still several yards away, the approaching horseman called out:

"That yuh, Lute?"

"And supposin' it ain't?" returned Stub.

The unknown cursed.

"Not Keggs! What the——"

Abruptly the moon appeared. Stub Ashton was able to make out the hard features of an utter stranger, a man probably a head taller than himself. The fellow checked a motion toward his hip when he saw where the cowboy's hand reposed.

"I was expectin' Keggs," he growled. "Did he send yuh instead?"

Stub shook his head.

"I reckon not, hombre. Leastwise, tuh the best uh my recollection, I ain't been sent for anythin' tuh-day but stray beef."

The stranger cursed again.

"If yuh didn't come in place uh Keggs what the blazes d'yuh mean by answerin' my signal?"

"Signal?" said Stub, innocently. "Why, I just seen yuh wave yuhr cigarette, so I waved back. I've kinda lost my way tuh the VG-Bar bunkhouse and thought mebbe I could get some directions."

The eyes of the hard-featured horseman searched the cowhand.

"How long yuh been on the VG-Bar?" he demanded.

"Just a week," Stub confessed. "I drifted up from the Southwest. Never worked in this part uh Wyomin' before."

"Well, young man," the stranger said harshly, "yuh'll find this country fine and healthy for jaspers what 'tends strickly tuh their own business. I reckon yuh know Lute Keggs?"

STUB ASHTON nodded. The man named was another hand employed on the VG-Bar.

"Lemme warn yuh Keggs is a bad jasper tuh cross! And so am I! We got some dealin's on that needn't intrust yuh. Better just forget yuh ever seen me or heard me mention Lute's name. Keep yuhr mouth shut, cowboy, and yuh'll come tuh no harm."

Stub's left hand tossed away his cigarette.

"I ain't frightened easy, hombre," he remarked gently. "I've met some tough pilgrims in my time and I'm still breathin'. But I can be plum' forgetful when it pays. S'posin' I do forget this little meetin'—then what? Uh course I oney been here a few days, but I've heard about the rustlin' goin' on in these parts. I ain't so dumb I can't figure what yuhr business with Keggs might be. However, I'm willin' tuh keep my suspicions tuh myself if——"

The other laughed shortly.

"I reckon I get yuh," he cut in. "Well, I ain't sayin' a thing. Yuh talk tuh Keggs the first chance yuh get, is my advice. If yuh're on the level and mean business he'll fix yuh up. If yuh ain't—Lord help yuh! Blame funny he ain't showed up this evenin'!"

Stub's left hand gathered the reins of his mount.

"I'll palaver with Mister Keggs right soon," he promised. "I'm Stub Ashton. What might yuhr monicker be, hombre?"

"Just tell Keggs yuh met up with Rick. That's enough."

"Pleased tuh meet yuh, Rick," grinned Stub. "Well, now we sorta understand each other, I reckon I'll be lopin' along. I'm so hollow that if I was a tree I'd topple over."

"Yuh head straight south—" the other pointed—"and yuh'll strike yuhr ranch buildin's."

"Much obliged!" The cowboy spurred his horse and shot off in the direction indicated. One eye, however, was cast warily over his shoulder, in case the hard-featured Rick contemplated treachery. But evidently the latter did not. He galloped back toward the rocky butte.

The hour must have been nine o'clock when Stub Ashton finally reached headquarters. The main ranch building was alight, and a number of horses tethered outside hinted of visitors.

"Where the devil yuh been?" snapped Foreman Harry Harkins. "I was figurin' I'd have tuh send out a coupla waddies tuh round yuh up."

"Peepin' prairie dogs! I hunted so long for them strays I come near losin' m'self. And I'm that hungry I could eat a chunk uh fried saddle!"

"I 'spose yuh didn't find the strays, neither," grumbled Harkins. "Hungry, are yuh? I'll go with yuh and see if Ching Wing can be coaxed outa any chuck."

The Chinese cook was none too gracious, but managed to scrape up sufficient food to satisfy the ravenous man. The foreman stood by while Stub bolted down the victuals.

"For a sawed-off squirt yuh shore can put a lot away," Harkins commented. "Berman Van Geld don't make no profit offa yuh!"

"What's goin' on tuh-night?" inquired the hand. "The boss throwin' a party?"

"They's a meetin' tuh discuss rustlin'," came the reply, rather grimly. "Ranchmen from all over the country are here, along with Bart Fordyce. Mebbe yuh've heard uh Bart. He's a detective workin' for the Cattlemen's Association—and a darn good one. He'll run them rustlers down if it can be done."

Stub gulped some coffee.

"Reckon the rustlers got a right smart head themselves, ain't they? The boys say this beef raidin' has been goin' on for quite a spell."

"Too long a spell. The ranchers is gettin' plum' tired uh it. By the way, Stub, Fordyce was askin' me some questions about yuh afore the meetin' begun."

"About me? What for?"

"Yuh're a new waddy on the ranch and a stranger in these parts. Nachully, in his business, he's a mite cur'yus. I tole him yuh looked all right tuh me, though."

"Don't see why he should be intrusted in me." Stub appeared disturbed.

"I reckon yuh needn't worry, Stub, as long as yuh ain't doin' no wrong. Well, I gotta drift up tuh the house now and sit in on the meetin'. See yuh later."

STUB ASHTON finished his meal, lighted a cigarette.

"Sounds like somebody might be tryin' tuh put a flea in my ear," he muttered.

Departing from the stuffy cook shack himself, Stub strolled out into the moonlight. Near the bunkhouse his trail crossed that of a powerfully-built

wrangler who was evidently on his way up from the corral.

"Oh, Keggs!" Stub called in a low tone.

"Huh?" The other stopped.

"I seen Rick tuh-night," said the smaller man. "He was lookin' for yuh."

"Rick!" Lute Keggs' voice became a growl. "Rick who? What yuh drivin' at, Ashton?"

"No need tuh get fussed, Keggs. It was a accident. Mebbe a lucky accident for both of us. He tole me tuh talk tuh yuh."

"Yeh?" Still Keggs was surly. "Talk tuh me about what, cowboy?"

"I ain't no fool, Keggs." Stub spoke rapidly. "I reckon I blundered ontuh somethin' tuh-night, but I can keep my mouth shut when it pays. I'm always willin' tuh add tuh my forty-five per. If I wasn't ambitious thataway I'd be in Arizona yet. I got a idee I can do m'self some good here, and I'd shore welcome the chance."

The bigger man reflected a moment.

"I dunno what passed between Rick and yuh, but yuh seem tuh know somethin', Ashton. Tuh-morrow's Satu'day. We'll be ridin' in tuh Range City in the evenin'. If I don't see you afore, meet me at Bake Rundle's pool hall and be ready tuh lay yuhr cards on the table. And don't talk with nobody else afore then!"

"I get yuh, hombre!"

Stub Ashton resumed his meandering. Lute Keggs looked after him, his heavy face plainly puzzled.

Nearly a dozen ranchmen of varying ages were seated in the large livingroom of Berman Van Geld, owner of the VG-Bar. Van Geld, a solidly built Teuton with small blue eyes, was almost directly under the suspended oil lamp.

A tall, lean, hawk-nosed man of possibly forty-five who stood near a partly open window was addressing the gathering in quick, incisive accents.

"Whoever directs this band of rustlers is a shrewd jasper," Bart Fordyce declared. "That the outlaws have a headquarters in the country beyond Bottleneck Gulch seems fairly well established. It'll be a pretty hard job tuh trap 'em in that wild region, especially as their chief appears tuh have spies or informants on some uh yuhr ranches. How many uh yuh are sure yuhr waddies can be trusted tuh the limit?"

"I'm willin' tuh answer for my boys," asserted Dan Walton, of the Box IW.

"The same goes for my outfit," added Thorpe Ogle, of the Triangle O.

"Excepting one newcomer, the VG-Bar has only old and trusted hands, I think," said Berman Van Geld, who spoke in carefully clipped phrases.

"That's the jasper I was discussin' with Harkins," nodded the detective. "I mean tuh keep an eye on him."

"Ashton's only been here a week," put in Harry Harkins. "Somebody was tippin' off the rustlers long afore!"

"True," admitted Fordyce. "Still—"

The detective stopped suddenly. Moving swiftly, he whipped out a revolver, threw high the nearby window and lunged out with his free hand. In a remarkable display of strength, he dragged a man over the sill into the room. The short, stocky figure of Stub Ashton was revealed.

"Eavesdroppin'!" grated Fordyce.

"So?" Berman Van Geld's blue eyes narrowed. "What have you to say for yourself, Ashton?"

The detective, his gun covering the cowboy, frowned.

"Yuhr new hand, huh? He's got a familiar look. Where've I seen yuh before, jasper?"

Stub made no response.

"I'll take yuhr hardware and then we'll try tuh find out why yuh was listenin' under the window. Yuh was a mite careless out there, young man; I got sharp ears."

FORDYCE reached out with his left hand to pluck the other's gun—and something happened. Recklessly and unexpectedly Stub Ashton leaped on the detective. Before the men in the room could recover from their surprise the revolver had been wrested from the latter's strong grasp.

A loud report, and the hanging oil lamp was shattered. Some of the hot fluid spattered the hands and arms of Berman Van Geld and he cursed loudly. All was confusion as the inmates of the room groped for weapons in the gloom or stamped out the burning oil.

An instant after shooting out the light Stub Ashton turned and dived through the open window. Landing on all fours, he scrambled up undamaged and ran for the tethered horses.

Abruptly a bulky figure loomed in front of him.

"What's wrong?" growled Lute Keggs.

"I'm in a helluva hurry, Keggs," Stub panted. "This man Fordyce wants me, and wants me bad. I gotta clear out. If all goes well, I'll meet yuh at that pool hall in Range City tuh-morrow night."

With this, the smaller man whisked on. A moment or two later he was galloping briskly away from the VG-Bar.

Men poured out of the main building and bunkhouse, Lute Keggs joining them unobtrusively. A few shots were fired fruitlessly. Berman Van Geld and his foreman organized a posse and rode after the fugitive. Detective Fordyce, his face hard, set the pace.

The posse returned to the ranch empty-handed. Despite his ignorance of the country, Stub Ashton had managed to elude his pursuers.

"Prob'ly headed intuh the Bottleneck Gulch country," Harry Harkins observed. "The deceivin' little cuss!"

Lute Keggs, who had been a member of the posse, might have given the foreman some information had he chosen to do so. But the burly hand kept his own counsel. He was resolved to converse privately with Ashton.

Just after dark Saturday evening Keggs entered the pool hall conducted by his friend Rundle in Range City. He drew the thin, sallow-featured proprietor to one side.

"Anyone been lookin' for me, Bake?"

"They's a squatty galoot named Ashton in the back room upstairs," Rundle replied. "Been layin' low here all day. Says you sent him tuh me. Who is he, Lute?"

"I ain't exactly sure yet. But I know that blasted Bart Fordyce pines tuh get his hands on him, which is in Ashton's favor. Seen Rick?"

"Yeh; he'll be along pronto."

"Send him up when he comes."

Keggs made his way to the rear room on the second floor that was a part of Rundle's living quarters. He found Stub Ashton calmly playing Canfield by the light of a smoky lamp.

"Evenin', Mister Keggs," greeted the card player.

The bigger man leaned across the table.

"Come clean, cowboy!" he said roughly. "Who the devil are yuh, anyhow? Fordyce has been ravin' ever since last night. He seems plum' eager tuh nail yuh."

"We ain't strangers," Stub admitted. "Last time he seen me they was some gun-play, and a good pal uh his got bumped off."

"Yuh mean yuh bumped him off?" demanded Keggs.

"I was handlin' a gun right lively at the time." Stub grinned at the other. "I reckon if Bart Fordyce ever gets the drop on me——"

He paused, and shuffled his deck of cards.

"S'pose yuh got the drop on him?" pointedly asked Keggs.

BEFORE Stub could answer, there was a tap at the door. A second later the hard-featured Rick stepped within. He glanced from one man to the other.

"Hope I ain't buttin' in, gents?" he observed.

"No," said Keggs. "I understand yuh've met Ashton here, Rick."

"Last night. I mistook him for you first. Why didn't yuh show up?"

"Bart Fordyce and a bunch uh cattlemen was meetin' with the boss at the ranch—I didn't figure it'd be wise tuh be missin'. What did yuh say tuh Ashton?"

"I sorta spilled things afore findin' out he had no connection with yuh, Lute. Then he told me he could keep his mouth shut and seemed anxious tuh join us. I tole him tuh see yuh and it looks like he ain't lost much time."

"He's keepin' outa sight uh Fordyce," Keggs explained. "That snoopin' galoot caught Ashton listenin' under a window—I ain't heard just why—"

"Harry Harkins got me worried by tellin' me Fordyce was right intrusted in my presence on the VG-Bar," cut in Stub. "I had tuh find out what he knew. It's been some little time since our trails crossed and I'm ridin' under a new monicker; but I reckon he ain't forgotten me."

"Fordyce never forgets nothin'." The hard-featured Rick swore foully.

"From what Harkins let out, yuh got yuhr nerve, Ashton," Keggs conceded. "After he'd been caught and dragged intuh the room, Rick, he snatched a gun outa Fordyce's hand, shot out the light and got away from the whole gang. We chased yuh till midnight, Ashton. Fordyce was plenty mad!"

"I figured yuh acted like a cool customer last night," said Rick. "Too bad yuh didn't drill Fordyce afore leavin'. I wish he was out uh our way."

"Bumpin' him off would put any hombre in solid with the chief," nodded Keggs. "Yuh say yuh want tuh throw in with us, Ashton?"

Stub's grin appeared again.

"It kinda looks as if my cow chaperonin' days is done hereabouts. The law is after me. Who is this chief yuh mention? I'm more'n willin' tuh talk business with him."

Keggs drew Rick to one side and talked in a low tone for several moments. Finally he turned to Stub.

"This fellow Fordyce is a thorn in yuhr side and ours, Ashton," he said. "I happen tuh know he'll be in Range City tuh-night. Prob'ly blew in afore now. He'll be stoppin' at the Range House. I think we can say for the chief they's five hundred bucks ready and waitin' for yuh if yuh bump him off—and a place in the gang, uh course."

Stub's eyes, grown steely, met those of the other two.

"When do I get the money, if I do the job?" he wanted to know. "Some uh it's got to be paid down."

"How about a hundred now and the rest when yuh've turned the trick?" offered Keggs.

Stub Ashton sprang to his feet, sweeping the cards to the floor.

"Show me the color uh yuhr money!"

Lute Keggs pulled forth a number of crumpled bills. He counted out four tens and three twenties.

"There yuh are! The other four hundred'll come from the chief hisself!"

Stub pocketed the currency.

"In less than twenty-four hours I hope tuh be collectin' again, hombres," he said significantly. "Where had we better meet—when it's done with?"

The others considered briefly.

"Why not at the entrance tuh Bottleneck Gulch—at noon tuh-morrow, pervided yuh get away with it tuh-

night?" Rick suggested. "It's good hidin' country, too. Here's how tuh get there."

He outlined a few simple directions and Stub Ashton nodded.

"I reckon yuh'll see me at noon," was his terse comment.

Lute Keggs returned to the VG-Bar that night, while Rick shared Bake Rundle's sleeping quarters. An hour before midnight Stub sallied forth on his grim mission. He did not return.

SUNDAY morning the hard-featured outlaw and the pool hall proprietor went out for breakfast together. The half-breed whose cheap café they patronized was bubbling with news.

"Have yuh heard what happened tuh Bart Fordyce?" he queried.

"No." Rundle who was in Rick's confidence, endeavored to speak casually. "Ain't gone and caught some rustlers?"

"I guess he won't catch no more," said the half-breed. "It looks like he's got his. Seems he left the Range House about midnight and rode outa town somewheres. He never come back. Early this mornin' somebody found his horse, and the saddle was all bloody. They was no sign uh Fordyce. The marshal got some boys tuhgether and they're out searchin' for the body. Guess they'll find it, all right."

When Rundle and Rick had finished their meal and left the café the latter remarked:

"This hombre Ashton seems tuh be a fast worker, Bake. I reckon I'll be ridin' on tuh meet Keggs. Prob'ly won't see me in town for a few days."

"If anythin' turns up at this end I'll get word tuh the boys," promised the pool hall proprietor.

The entrance to Bottleneck Gulch was a rough, wild, wooded spot, well into the hills. The sun was high overhead when Keggs and Rick found Stub Ashton there, mounted on the same sorrel gelding he had taken from the VG-Bar two nights before. Upon the hard, seamed countenances of the pair were expressions of unholy joy.

"Rick tells me yuh settled Fordyce," Keggs chuckled.

Somewhat melodramatically Stub, without speaking, drew an object from his shirt. It was a blood-stained wallet. This he extended them.

"What did yuh do with the body?" inquired Rick. "Last I heard the horse had been found, but no remains."

"I'm savin' the story for yuhr chief," responded Stub. "No use goin' over everythin' twice. And I want tuh see the color uh them four hundred bucks."

Keggs had been examining the gore-flecked wallet. Undeniably this grisly token belonged—or had belonged—to Bart Fordyce. It contained a number of papers scribbled with notes, other data of various kinds and several bills.

"Reckon the chief'll be right glad tuh see you, Ashton," he said. "We better be headin' for the the layout. It's quite a trip beyond Bottleneck Gulch. Dress him up, Rick."

The hard-featured outlaw surprisingly produced a long brown hood of coarse heavy material. Apparently it was devoid of eyeholes.

"Slip on this bonnet," he bade.

Stub scowled.

"What's the idee?" he demanded. "I don't need tuh be blinded and I won't be!"

"Chief's orders!' insisted Keggs. "Yuh gotta go this way or not at all!"

"Yuh ain't been accepted intuh the gang yet, Ashton," added Rick. "Until the chief passes on yuh personal we ain't tippin' off our headquarters."

Vigorously and violently Stub protested; but his words made no impression upon the pair who claimed to be acting under orders.

"Well," he grumbled at length, "I

reckon I gotta play ostrich tuh get what's comin' tuh me. Blamed if I like all this myst'ry, though. Yuhr chief has some plum' funny idees."

He submitted to having the brown hood slipped over his head. One of the pair seized the reins of his mount and the journey through Bottleneck Gulch began.

After a jolting trip over a rough route, which he guessed took fully two hours, Stub Ashton felt his gelding being halted, heard voices addressing Keggs and Rick.

Still hooded, the stocky young man was helped from the horse and guided into some kind of building. A heavy door shut behind him. The covering was removed from his head.

COMING suddenly into the light, Stub blinked his eyes. He blinked them again upon beholding before him a bizarre figure in a brown hood similar to that which had enveloped him—save it had holes cut for the eyes—and a long, shapless robe of the same hue. From the size of the latter he deducted its wearer might be a large individual.

Keggs and Rick also were occupants of the room. Evidently it was the interior of a rude log shack and was but meagerly furnished.

"Peepin' prairie dogs!" burst from Stub. "What is this—the headquarters of the Kow Klucks Klan or somethin'? I don't savvy all this hocus-pocus!"

The brown-robed figure spoke in a hoarse, muffled, unnatural voice.

"Yuh say yuh've killed Bart Fordyce. Yuhr proof!"

It was Keggs who stepped forward with the blood-stained wallet. While the disguised leader of the rustlers was going through it, Stub tried to study the man. All he could see were the eyes, which appeared dark through the narrow slits in the hood, and the hands protruding from brown sleeves. His gaze fastened on the latter.

Again the muffled tones.

"If yuh shot Fordyce, as it seems, what did yuh do with the body? How can we be sure he's dead?"

"Last night I followed Fordyce outa Range City when he left the hotel. I don't know where he was goin' or why. All I know is I got my chance at that crick about three miles from town—"

"Yelluh Cat Crick, yuh must mean," interrupted Rick.

"Mebbe that is the name uh it," Stub nodded. "Fordyce heard me comin' and turned on me. We both drawed fast—and I was a mite luckier. My lead hit him in the chest, which explains the splatters on his wallet. After I took that soovyneer offen him I thrun the body intuh the stream. His horse went skedaddlin' when he fell. No tellin' how far away the cayuse was found. But the remains is in Yelluh Cat Crick."

"So for the second night in a row, yuh bested the cattlemen's star detective?" pursued the mysterious chief.

"I reckon the evidence shows it," was the retort.

The figure in brown shook his head.

"I ain't satisfied yet, cowboy, that yuh're on the level with us. Yuh don't act like most killers I've knowed. How did all yuhr trouble with Fordyce start, anyhow?"

Stub Ashton flared up.

"Say, what the hell's the idee?" I ain't here tuh answer questions all day! I done my job and I want what's comin' tuh me! I'd be right pleased if yuh'd cut out the monkeyshinin' and get down tuh brass tacks!"

"Grab him and take away his gun!" grated an unexpected command.

Lute Keggs and his companion obeyed so quickly Stub had no chance to resist. His six-shooter was jerked from its holster and one arm firmly pinioned by each of the pair.

The eyes peering through the brown slits glittered.

"All right, cowboy! We'll give yuh what's comin' tuh yuh. I don't trust yuh, and I get rid uh jaspers I don't trust pronto! Bumped off Fordyce, did yuh? Well, a life for a life is fair pay. And while dead men ain't supposed tuh tell tales, yuh'll tell one! Leastwise, that wallet belongin' tuh Fordyce which'll be found on yuhr carcass should tell a lot! When the marshal at Range City or the friends uh Fordyce run cross what remains uh yuh the myst'ry uh his death'll all be cleared up. How does that strike yuh?"

"Why, yuh damned snake!" Stub Ashton strained his imprisoned arms.

Even the hard faces of Rick and Keggs blanched a trifle at the cold-blooded proposal of their chief. But their grip did not slacken.

A MUFFLED chuckle issued from the brown hood.

"Did yuh really figure I had no more brains than tuh throw away five hundred dollars when——"

The sudden, sharp crack of a rifle cut short the jeering tones. A fusillade of shots followed. Mingled with the sound of exploding powder was the drum of horse's hoofs.

A man plunged wildly into the log shack.

"We're surrounded, chief!" he gasped. "Dozens uh men—and Bart Fordyce hisself leadin' them! I seen his hawk nose!"

"Damnation!" escaped the brown-robed leader. "We've been tricked! Bar that door and . . ."

Stub Ashton grasped his opportunity. He jerked free from the startled Keggs and Rick. His doubled left fist drove into the pit of the latter's stomach, sending him down in agony. His right hand clawed inside his shirt, came forth with a small automatic pistol that had been concealed there.

The weapon barked just as the hooded chieftan whipped out a revolver. The brown figure fell forward, heavily.

Lute Keggs and one rustler were still to be reckoned with. Even the hard-featured Rick was disposed of only for the moment.

Stub moved quickly. A terrific smash with his clubbed pistol dropped the unknown rustler. Another lusty tap on the head of the writhing Rick stretched him beside his fellow outlaw. Then the cowboy whirled to face the drawn revolver of the burly Keggs.

Both blazed away at close range. Stub's bullet tore through the stomach. Hot lead ripped his own thigh. As he went down, however, the smaller man fired again, shattering the temple of his foe.

Bleeding but triumphant, he was found by Bart Fordyce, Dan Walton, Thorpe Ogle and others of the posse which had conquered the rustlers outside the shack. Despite the pain of his wound. Stub managed a grin.

"Peepin' prairie dogs! What a ruction I've had all by myself!" he grunted. "Yuh come blame near bein' too late, Bart!"

"Where's the hombre with the first aid kits?" snapped the detective. "While we're fixin' up his leg yuh take the two live ones here and add 'em tuh the rest uh the prisoners."

He turned to Stub. "Made as good time's we could, yuh battlin' bobcat! Uh course we had tuh trail far behind yuhr pair uh guardeens when yuh started through Bottleneck Gulch, and the route twisted around a lot. Then it took time tuh surround the layout. It's a good hidin' place. I reckon we must be about fifteen miles north uh the VG-Bar. We got all the rustlers —alive or dead. The marshal at Range City prob'ly has grabbed that jasper Rundle at his end, and the gang is

broke up complete. Yuh accounted for more'n yuhr share, includin' the elusive ringleader, if I ain't mistook!"

"Let's strip off that hood!" exclaimed Dan Walton. "I'm pinin' tuh see the jasper who outwitted us so long!"

"Yuh'll find when yuh do that the VG-Bar is minus a owner," Stub informed the ranchman.

"Good Heavens!"

Thorpe Ogle had pulled away the brown covering to reveal the countenance of Berman Van Geld, his dead face a mask of hate.

"He was a clever devil," said Stub. "I reckon he worked his racket so mebbe nobody in the gang knew who he really was, except Rick and Keggs. He fooled me for awhile tuh-day—the way he changed that nice—educated voice uh his. And the brown hood made his blue eyes look dark. But his hands give him away. One has the marks uh the burnin' oil which fell on him the night I shot out the lamp."

"Just who d'yuh happen tuh be, anyhow?" queried Dan Walton. "Uh course we know yuh're in cahoots with Bart, but he ain't tole us much about yuh yet."

FORDYCE smiled.

"Mebbe I better. Well, gents, Stub is known tuh headquarters as Lew Russell. He's an undercover operative for the Association, and went tuh work quietly a week afore I showed up. He picked the VG-Bar because Berman Van Geld was kinda under suspicion from the start. He lost less cattle than any uh yuh, though he did steal some uh his own for appearances' sake. He also was in financial difficulties. So he took up rustlin' and right cleverly, too. Keggs was the only hand on the VG-Bar in with him. I reckon he and Rick were sorta lootenants. The rest uh the waddies on the ranch, includin' Foreman Harkins, are honest. That is, as far as Russell—I mean, Stub—could learn."

"My idee was tuh join the rustlers if I could," Stub stated. "Bart and me agreed tuh act like enemies tuh further that purpose. My capture under the window and the escape was all a trick. It got me over with Keggs. After my first day on the ranch I was sure he was crooked, and then evenin' before last his friend Rick accident'ly tipped me what I wanted tuh know. So I pulled a grandstand play.

"Van Geld feared Bart. He wanted him outa the way and I seemed the man for the job. Through Keggs and Rick I was hired tuh do some killin'. I accepted, then got in touch with Bart and laid plans tuh trap the rustlers. I fixed up evidence uh the alleged killin' while Bart disappeared tuh round yuh all up for a posse quietly and trail me when I went intuh the outlaw lair. Yuh know how it worked out.

"I run intuh a snag here, though. Van Geld couldn't be fooled easy. I reckon he didn't swallow my killin' story, which was the best I could make up in a hurry. Anyway, he was goin' tuh bump me off and let me be found with Bart's wallet on me! If yuh hadn't come in the nick uh time one detective would really been dead!"

"That's enough talkin' right now, Russell," Fordyce said. "Rest yuhrself. We've bandaged up yuhr thigh as best we could, but I reckon we gotta move yuh out tuh where they's a sawbones."

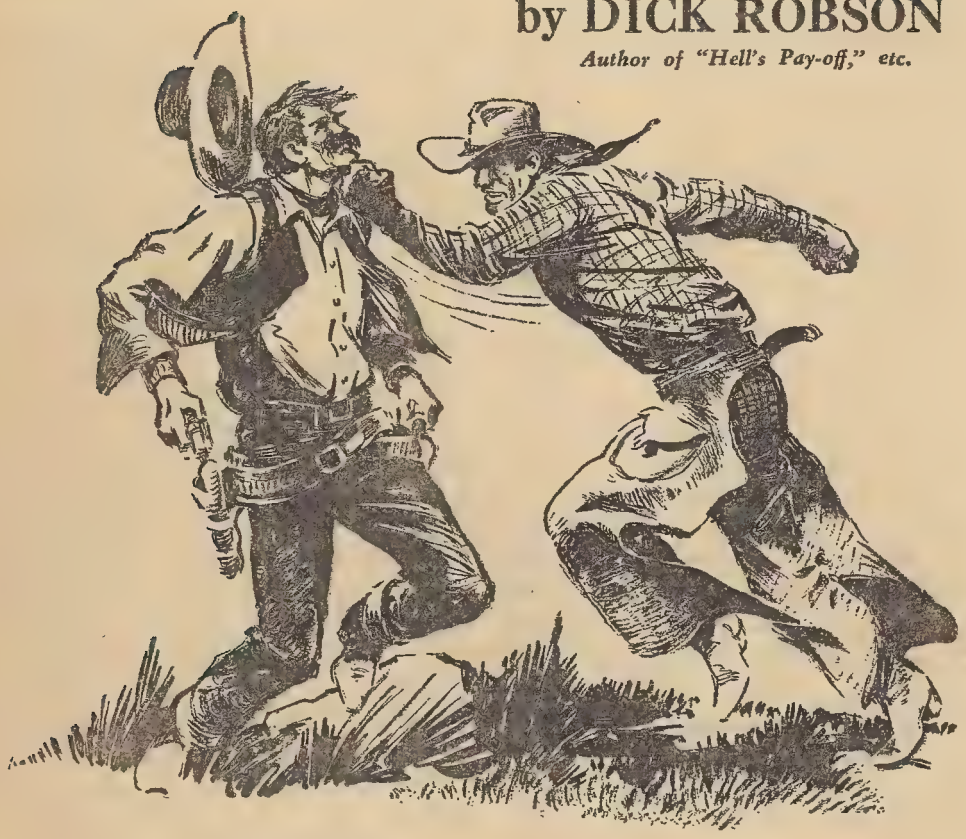
Stub essayed a feeble grin.

"Too blame bad I couldn't have collected the full five hundred bucks for killin' yuh Bart. It would come in right handy for hospital bills!"

Blood Trail

by DICK ROBSON

Author of "Hell's Pay-off," etc.



Deputy Marshal Bill Lane risked a hangman's noose and bushwhack bullets —to side a renegade bank robber in a six-gun showdown against the law!

BILL LANE reined in his horse, thoughtfully scratched the back of his neck, and lifted the Winchester out of the scabbard on his saddle while he studied the cabin squatting out in the alkali flat.

Things weren't making sense. He had the testimony of his own eyes on the trail he had been following that there was only one man in the cabin and that man was wounded. On the other hand, he had the testimony of a dozen of the biggest ranchers in Oneida County that there were at least a dozen men in the gang that had been raising assorted varieties of hell in the county for over a year.

Sometimes the job of deputy marshal didn't seem to fit Bill Lane's naturally easy-going nature.

There was no way a man could come at that cabin without riding in the open for a quarter of a mile. He didn't like that, either. If the gang was as big as the ranchers of Oneida County thought it was

when they petitioned the governor for a marshal, his chances of crossing the white stretch of alkali were decidedly slim.

Why, in heaven's name, one man should want to hold up the bank at Level and get himself shot by a teller when there were a dozen men to do the job right, didn't hold water, either. And what was queerer yet was why that man would make straight for old Handout Jim Small's cabin and leave a plain trail of blood.

Bill Lane gave his neck a last, thoughtful scratch and prodded his horse out carefully onto the alkali.

Nothing happened. He wasn't fooled any. They were probably letting him ride in to see if there was a posse with him. There wasn't.

His tanned face with the short nose and wide mouth that was usually twisted up in a grin wasn't grinning any as he approached the cabin. That blood trail leading in meant trouble of some kind for old Handout Jim Small.

Bill Lane was probably the only man who had ever met Handout Jim Small who liked him. Handout had earned his name panhandling meals from cow camps. He hadn't the nerve of a jackrabbit and he was as crooked as a snake when it came to shelling a drunken cowpoke's money out of his pockets or lifting a cow where no risk was involved.

He liked to boast of the big cattle hauls he had made down on the Rio Grande, and Bill Lane knew that Handout Jim Small had never seen the Rio Grande.

But he had a loyalty for his friends that was out of keeping with the rest of his sneak thief, cantankerous nature. If Handout Jim had a dollar, which he rarely did, any man who needed that money could have it. If a man helped him once, that debt was a sacred thing to Handout Jim.

THERE was no sign of life from the cabin. Sweat trickled down Bill's spine. He held his horse to a slow trot. If he tried to rush the shack before he was close enough, he would be inviting bullets.

He jerked up suddenly. He caught the glitter of sunlight on a rifle barrel behind the window as soon as it appeared.

Several things flashed through his mind while he watched that rifle slide snake-like out of the window.

Sheriff Lyman was ten miles away over on the Bitter Creek with a posse. He didn't like what he had seen of the fat, swaggering Alf Lyman, but he would have welcomed him then. It looked to Bill Lane as though he had stuck out his neck and asked for disaster.

He plunged his spurs into his horse's flanks and leaned to the lunge of the animal. The carbine in the shanty window roared, and he felt the bullet rip through the slack in his shirt across his back.

He let the plunge of the horse carry him out of the saddle. No use sitting there and being shot full of holes, he thought. But if anything happened to old Handout Jim Small, there were going to be carcasses strewn about that shack, and he wouldn't need Sheriff Lyman's help to do some of it.

He lay perfectly still. His body would make a perfect target from the cabin window, he knew, but he was gambling on no more shots coming from inside.

One man, or a dozen, holed up and expecting a posse wouldn't waste cartridges on a man they thought was already dead.

After what seemed hours, Bill Lane hunched experimentally toward the cabin. He hunched closer and gathered his legs up under him to hit the door.

The door swung open without his

needing to hit it. The business end of a rifle jabbed out. Bill already had his gun in his hand then and was bringing it up as the rifle came up at him.

Then he saw the whiskered face behind the rifle, the watery blue eyes and the mouth slobbering tobacco juice.

"Jim Small," he yelled. "Put down that gun, you damn' old codger. What—"

The rifle seemed to drop out of Handout Jim's hands of its own accord. He blinked owlishly into the hard sunlight. It wasn't until Bill stepped into the door that he saw the old man's right side was laid open by a bullet, and blood was dripping in a little trickle from his shirt.

Bill Lane stopped. The grin froze on his face for a moment, then left entirely. The man who had held up the Level bank had been shot. He had trailed that man to the cabin, and Handout Jim was alone in that cabin.

But the thing didn't make sense. Old Jim Small hadn't nerve enough to hold up a bank.

"Lord, Bill," he hardly noticed the old man grabbing his hand. "Last time I heard of you you was aimin' to be a law dog. They got onto you and let you out, eh? Lord, I cain't think of a man I'd rather see, 'ceptin' maybe one."

Bill slowly turned out the pocket of his vest where he carried his gold shield of a marshal.

Handout Jim looked at it. His rheumy eyes got more watery, and his face twisted up. His hand began to slide down to the Winchester.

BILL caught his wrist and shoved him back.

"I hate like hell to do this, Jim," his voice sounded a little tight. "But dammit, there ain't nothin' else a man can do. I've got my job. I'll try to make things easy for you."

"Figured because I always trusted you a lot, you could take me in," Handout snarled. "That's why Alf Lyman sent you, huh? Scared to do his law ridin' himself, was he?"

Handout Jim twisted out of Bill's grasp. He made a desperate lunge for the rifle, and Bill's fist caught him in midair. The blow spun him back against the wall.

Bill crowded in front of him, breathing hard. He hated to hurt the old fellow, but if Handout got his hands on that rifle, one of them would be killed.

"Where's the money?" he snapped. "Lyman said it was ten thousand you lifted."

"It wasn't only six," Handout snarled. "And by God, Bill, if you think you're goin' to get that and get the only chance I've got of beatin' this deal, you can go plumb to hell."

Bill stared straight into the old man's eyes. "Handout," he said, "if you was to turn over that cash, I might sort of turn my back for a minute and not see which way you went. It'd more than likely cost my job, but what the devil—"

Handout Jim's watery eyes looked past Bill Lane to the open door of the shack, and the white glare of alkali on the other side. There was safety out there, and in the shack there was at least twenty years in the penitentiary staring him in the face.

Bill Lane eased his body between the old man and the door. "Don't try it," he warned.

"Handout," he went on slowly. "Make this thing easy for me, will you? When those cowpokes down in Utah was going' to string you up for stealin' horses, who snaked you out? What about over in Cheyenne when you dealt a cold deck at the poker table? Well, dammit, hand over that money, and I'll say you wasn't here when I came to the shack."

Handout Jim's eyes strayed for an instant to the box stove. He looked away immediately, but Bill Lane had seen that glance. There was no fire in the stove, and ashes were spilled out on the floor. Bill took one step toward the stove when Handout clutched his arm and dragged him back.

"Listen, Bill," he whined. "It ain't the bank deal that matters. There's been stages stopped down here and ranches cleaned out and Lord knows what all. God, Bill, can't you see they'll hang me for all of them things. I gotta have that money to do a little bargaining. They ain't goin' to hang nobody when there's six thousand dollars missing.

"Bill, it's like this. Pat Heeley, he's an old duffer from over Bitter Creek way, he heard three mozos talkin' about a marshal comin' in. He said they was plannin' to knock over the bank down there at Level and let me take the blame for that. He wouldn't tell me who they was because he said I'd go shootin' off my mouth and we'd both get bumped. But me, I just figured if I did have the money from that bank I'd have something to bargain with, and there wouldn't be no quick justice so to speak."

Bill considered. There was a good deal in what the old man said all right. If the bank was held up and he was caught with any of the loot, the natural assumption would be that he had organized the other raids in the county. A trip to a cottonwood tree would be the natural course.

BUT if he had six thousand dollars of those ranchers' money, they would think twice before hanging him without discovering the whereabouts of the money.

"Where's this guy Heeley?" Bill snapped. "He knows who's at the bottom of this. And by the pink-whiskered prophet, if you're lyin' to me—"

"Pat's dead." There was no doubt of the fear in Handout Jim's voice. "When I stuck up that bank, I hit right for his shack. But somebody beat me to it. He was filled full of holes. Listen now, Bill—"

Bill wasn't listening. That story would have about as much chance of being believed by a jury, if Handout ever reached a jury, as a snowball would of having of rolling through hell unscathed. Still, he himself believed the old man. For one thing, it would take a pretty desperate push from somewhere to give Handout nerve enough to hold up a bank.

Bill Lane was a marshal. He hadn't been sent to Oneida County to recover bank loot but to put a stop to outlawry there. He gave his neck another thoughtful scratching. If he trusted old Handout, he might be stepping perilously close to what was law and what wasn't law. But his usual philosophy where such things were concerned was "what the hell, anyway."

Handout Jim was standing facing the door. Bill had his back to it. The first intimation that Bill Lane had of anything coming from the direction of the alkali flats was when he saw the old man's body stiffen.

He didn't catch the meaning of Handout Jim's shrill curse. Handout made a lunge for the stove. Bill caught him by the shoulder and spun him back.

"I figured you wouldn't double-cross me," he rasped.

Instead of answering, Handout jerked a bony finger toward the door. Bill took one quick look over his shoulder and swore in his throat.

Half a dozen mounted men were reined up at the edge of the alkali flat looking toward the shack. Bill could make out Sheriff Lyman's fat body hunched down in the saddle. The rest of the posse didn't look encouraging.

They were a hard-looking lot, and they carried rifles across their pommels. They were evidently puzzling over his horse ground-hitched in front of the shack.

"Get that Winchester and bash me on the head," Bill snapped at Handout. "Then slope pronto."

Handout's whiskers trembled a little. "Couldn't do it, Bill. I leave a trail, see, blood. Grab that dinerio—in the stove. Get upstairs. They won't do anything till they get that money."

Bill Lane didn't stop to do any thinking. The posse was crossing the alkali and flanking out to surround the cabin while he pawed through the ashes of the stove.

Handout had buried the oilcloth wrapped package deep in the ashes. He could hear the squeal of saddle leather when his fingers touched it.

He clambered up the ladder into the three foot high attic between the ceiling of the shack and the roof. Men were coming into the cabin when he pulled the ladder up after him.

"Reach high, and don't try anything," he heard Alf Lyman's deep voice rasp at Handout. "Looks like we nailed you cold. Now where's that bank money, and talk quick."

Bill Lane flattened himself against the boards of the attic. There were cracks half an inch wide in places between the warped boards, and he fitted his eye to one of the cracks.

It was hot in the attic, and the air was dead and musty smelling. But he wasn't noticing the heat any.

HANDOUT evidently hadn't reached high quickly enough to suit the sheriff because Bill caught the thud of a fist against a man's face. He saw Handout stagger back and Lyman follow him. The sheriff's sledgehammer fist shot out again and caught the old man in the midriff and doubled him up.

Alf Lyman might be sheriff of Oneida County, Bill promised himself, but the time wasn't going to be too far distant when he'd get the feel of a fist in his own stomach. Bill slipped the package he had taken from the stove inside his shirt and kept still.

He could see by the expression on Handout's face that the old fellow was weakening. One more blow and he would talk. Bill's hands clenched at his sides. If Handout Jim weakened, one Bill Lane would lose his marshal's badge and probably have a taste of penitentiary life himself.

"What about that damn marshal, boss," a posseman with an eye that kept watering down his cheek asked. "That was his horse that was outside."

"Shut up," Lyman snarled at the man.

He seized Handout by the scruff of the neck and flung him into a chair. "Yeh, what about the marshal?" he demanded. "You killed him, too, didn't you? That makes about four killings we've got cinched against you. Now where's the money?"

Handout's face tightened up. A moment before he had been ready to talk, but the threat in the sheriff's voice stopped him. If Alf Lyman and the posse got their hands on that six thousand dollars, it wouldn't take long for old Handout to feel the bite of a lariat on his wizened neck.

"So you figure you'll lay dogo for a spell, eh?" the sheriff rocked back on his heels and glared at Handout. "Well, we ain't in any hurry either."

"Blinkey, fix up a fire in that stove," the sheriff ordered the man with the weepy eye.

Bill Lane cursed the fate that had ever made him a marshal. He told himself the sheriff wouldn't dare torture a prisoner, but he knew that Alf Lyman intended to do just that.

He watched two possemen lash

Hand-out to a chair, pull off his boots and run a lariat around his ankles. They dragged him so that his legs were wrapped around the stove, and the lariat was tied to a nail in the wall.

Kindling began to crackle. As the heat increased the pain would become unbearable. A man hugging a stove like that would confess to things he hadn't done in order to escape.

Bill Lane's finger nails dug at his palms. He couldn't lie there and watch the old man burned, and he couldn't do anything about it, either.

If he came out of that loft it would be the same as confessing that he had been helping Handout escape the law. He knew what he could expect then. The state of Idaho had unpleasant ways of dealing with officers turned crooked. He would have plenty of gray whiskers when he left the penitentiary at Boise.

He could smell the heat coming up from the stove. Handout Jim's face was twisted with pain, and tears from his watery eyes cut channels through the dust on his cheeks. But he was holding out.

He had his mouth frozen shut and Bill had the feeling that if he died there tied to the stove it would still be shut. He had a feeling, too, that it wasn't just to save his own neck that Handout wasn't talking.

Alf Lyman leaned back against the wall. He unhooked the gold toothpick from his watch chain and began cleaning his finger nails with it. The five other men crowded about the cabin.

Bill Lane raised up silently and slid toward the trap door. A man could stand so much, and he had stood all he could. He was sick at his stomach and there were red spots in front of his eyes.

HE knew what sometimes made men killers then. It was the kind of revolting hatred he felt for the sheriff of Oneida County. He might lose his marshal's badge and go to the pen. He might even hang, but he wouldn't lie there flat on his stomach in an attic and watch what was going on below.

He got the trap door up without making any sound. He could see the tops of men's heads below him. They were watching Handout Jim, and old Handout wasn't making a sound.

Bill Lane didn't bother to lower the ladder. He dropped through the trap door.

He lit sprawling, and as he lit, he felt the gun slither from his open holster. He couldn't see where it slid. Men were crowding out of the way and grabbing at their hips.

He knew what he was going to do before he jumped. He had his jack-knife open in his teeth. A gun roared at him as he rolled toward the stove. He felt the bullet shiver the floor beneath his hands.

Handout Jim toppled over backward when Bill slashed the ropes that bound his legs around the stove. Bill caught a glimpse of the old man struggling at the ropes that bound his arms to the chair, as the posse closed in around him.

He tried to reach Lyman. Bill Lane was running loco then. He saw the man called Blinkey in front of him, and he felt the jab of a gun against his chest. He stabbed out with the jack-knife.

Blinkey went down. He squealed like a stuck shoat, and when he fell, he tore the knife out of Bill's grasp. Bill hardly noticed that. He was laughing at Lyman, shoulders down, fighting off men who had come in too close to use their guns.

He reached Lyman and saw the sheriff try to twist back. He didn't know where his fist started from, but he put every ounce of weight he had behind it. The fist ended in Alf Lyman's sagging middle, and it seemed to Bill his arm

sunk almost to his elbow in fat.

Lyman wheezed when the wind went out of him, and he went down. Bill caught sight of old Handout scooting through the door. He saw a revolver barrel arcing down at his head, and he felt the crash of it against his skull.

"Pretty thick head," Bill thought. The blow knocked him down, but he was still conscious to feel ropes pinioning his hands and to see Lyman struggle up from the floor, still clutching his middle.

"Go over him and see if he's got anything tucked under his shirt or anyplace," Lyman gasped.

Bill said nothing when he felt the package ripped out of his shirt and saw Lyman slash the rawhide cords that bound it and thumb through stacks of high denomination bills. But he thought plenty.

"Bill Lane," he thought, "you sure put the kibosh on everything. Handout's scheduled for a hanging if he's caught. Maybe you'll get the same thing because you sure opened up that Blinkey feller's gizzard. Maybe sometime you'll learn to keep your temper, but it looks plumb doubtful."

Lyman shoved his heavy face close to Bill's. "Marshal," his eyes were blood shot and glaring. "You was going to rip things wide open comin' down here, wasn't you? I think maybe you've seen a little too much. I ain't forgettin' that poke you give me, either. I think maybe it'll be better if you're one of them marshals that died doin' their duty you hear tell about."

"Want me to let him have it right now?" one of the sheriff's men asked hopefully.

Lyman shook his head. "I'm takin' my time about givin' him his come upenses. It's time we light out anyhow. There's goin' to be a flock of marshals around next, and this bank haul makes about all we could get here. We'll take him up to the rock hole with us."

Bill Lane's brain was still catching ideas experimentally to see if it could still function after having a gun barrel warped over his cranium, but he got the drift of what Lyman said all right.

Alf Lyman had been pulling a Henry Plummer stunt. While sheriff of Oneida County, he had been systematically looting it. But, unlike Plummer had done in Montana, he wasn't going to stay until the law caught up with him and hanged him while he was still in office.

After the gang had split the loot they had taken, they would move on to fresh hunting ground. Bill Lane might know that, but it looked then as though, if he ever told what he knew, he would have to do it through a spiritualistic medium. Altogether, his prospects looked considerably worse than bad.

Bill Lane mounted the horse that Lyman motioned him to. His hands were trussed behind him and a rope led from his neck to the horn of the sheriff's saddle. There wasn't much he could do but ride.

The sun was setting and sending slashes of red and orange across the sky above the parched out land of sage and juniper. Bill tried to reason what old Handout Jim would do, and his reasoning didn't encourage him any.

Handout might put as much distance as possible between himself and Oneida County, leaving Bill to shift for himself. Or he might do down to Level and try to get a posse of ranchers to ride with him.

The latter course would be hopeless and the former would be fatal to Bill Lane. His neck began to itch, and he couldn't scratch it. His head felt as though the top of his skull kept rising up toward the stars and then settling with a crash.

The trail pitched upward through rimrock. They were crossing the divide

into the Bitter Creek country, Bill decided. It was nearly midnight when they rode into a stream and followed the water course for half a mile.

After that they rode along a hogback ridge where the ground was too rocky to preserve hoofprints. Their trail would be impossible to follow. They turned straight toward the canyon wall, and it looked to Bill as though they intended to ride over it.

It wasn't until they were against the lava cliff that he saw the narrow break with a boulder in front of it. From ten feet a man would never know that break was there. The opening was wide enough for only one horse to pass at a time. After they had ridden a hundred yards, the crack widened into an arroyo and at the end of the arroyo, a basin was scooped out of the lava crumblings.

There was a cabin, corrals, and horses in the basin. Bill whistled under his breath. Al Lyman's gang had a made to order hideout.

"Nice place, ain't it?" Lyman taunted him. "A dead man could stay in here till the buzzards picked him clean, and nobody'd ever know the difference."

Lyman went into the cabin alone, and Bill could hear him tearing up the floor. One of the other men built a fire and began slicing bacon into a skillet. Lyman was sweating when he came out.

"All there, boys," he puffed out his cheeks. "Close to ten thousand apiece, I'd say. Plenty of big times for everybody."

The man who had built the fire came up to his feet slowly. Bill noticed his hand was close to his gun when he edged close to Lyman.

"Ten thousand," he roared. "By God, there's closer to twenty thousand apiece in there, you doublecrossing—"

HE never finished. Alf Lyman's hands hardly seemed to move. There was a blur, the blue flash of gunsteel, and a roar. The man who was coming at him folded up without touching his gun.

"I said ten thousand." Lyman bit the end from a cigar and lighted it.

Lyman and the three men who were left ate in silence. Bill sat with his back against a stump. He was trussed so that the only way he could move was by rolling. One of the men asked Lyman about handing Bill some grub and Lyman shook his head.

"He won't be needin' any," he said ominously.

When he had finished eating, Lyman strode over to where Bill was hunched up. "Want a smoke, fellow," he asked, "before you shake hands with Blinkey and Wilson out there?" He jerked a fat thumb toward the brush where they had dragged the man he had shot.

Bill nodded without speaking. Lyman lighted another cigar, and when it was going he held it out toward Bill. Bill reached for it with his mouth. Lyman reversed the cigar so that if he took it, he had to take the glowing end in his mouth.

The grin was still plastered on Bill Lane's face when he clamped his teeth into the cigar and held the live coal in his mouth until it sizzled out. Lyman wasn't going to have the enjoyment of seeing him flinch.

"Nervy, eh?" Lyman snarled. "Well, I'm not forgettin' about that poke you gave me down there in that shack."

A pawlike hand jerked Bill to his feet. A fist lashed into his face. It was hard to keep his balance, bound as he was. Another fist drove into his teeth and knocked him against the cabin wall.

"Cut these ropes off him," Lyman ordered one of the men watching from the fire.

Bill's arms were numb when the slashed ropes dropped off.

Dawn was beginning to break, filling the basin with a grayish light and mak-

ing the rocks and the junipers stand out darkly. In another half hour, it would be light.

Lyman seemed to study the slope of ground up into the arroyo for a moment. His pudgy hand rested on his gun. There was a satisfied, assured smile on his heavy face when he turned to the men watching him.

"You fellows want to see some shooting? Well, keep your eyes on this."

He prodded Bill with his fist. "Start runnin', fellow. I'll give you twenty yards start, and I'll shoot the wind out of your pants before I drop you."

Bill rubbed some life into his numb fingers and reached for his tobacco sack. Lyman wanted a chance to display his gun play. If Bill Lane started up that slope, he didn't have one chance in ten thousand of getting a dozen feet beyond the twenty yard deadline.

"No," he said. "I don't reckon I'll play jackrabbit."

Lyman knocked the cigarette out of Bill's hand and prodded him away from the cabin with his gun. Bill glanced down at the ground. His eyes froze there for a minute, then he turned away, hoping that Lyman hadn't followed his glance.

There were dark spots on the greasewood leaves that could mean only one thing. A wounded man had crouched there. The man hadn't been bleeding badly, but there was blood on those leaves.

Bill's throat felt dry. Old Handout Jim had trailed them into the hideout and was skulking somewhere around the cabin.

He hadn't the nerve of a jackrabbit, but he had followed into almost certain death on the long chance of helping Bill Lane.

The old man couldn't do anything against Lyman and his men. He hadn't been armed when he left the cabin, and he couldn't have gotten a gun since. He would be walking directly into a bullet if he tried to interrupt what Lyman was doing.

In another half hour it would be daylight, and some of Lyman's men could not help but spot those bloodspots and smoke old Handout into the open, unless he had left before that.

IF Bill Lane was alive, he wouldn't leave. But if Bill wasn't alive, there would be no reason for his staying. He could get out through that arroyo before Lyman's men knew he had been in there.

The muscles in Bill's legs tightened. It wasn't worth sacrificing another man's life simply to live half an hour longer.

"Handout," Bill thought to himself, "There's them that figures you're a coyote pup's poor relation, but you'd stick by a man. Doesn't leave me much choice."

He threw himself toward the slope. He intended that dash to take Lyman by surprise, maybe give him a few seconds longer; not that a few seconds would mean much, though.

He heard one of the men at the fire give a warning shout, and he heard Alf Lyman's cursing growl. A gun roared, and a bullet spanged into the rock a few inches to his right.

That bullet had been meant to turn him, make him jump. Lyman had missed deliberately. Bill didn't turn. The next bullet cut the air at his left, where Lyman figured he would be.

The next shot would catch him. At that distance a man who handled a gun as Lyman did, couldn't miss. Bill drove his body in a desperate effort to clamber up the slope while he waited for the roar of a gun that would bring him rolling to the bottom.

The roar came. It seemed to him a full minute before he realized he hadn't felt the jarring smack of a bullet be-

tween his shoulders. He hadn't heard it richochet from a rock either.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Lyman was on the ground, fighting at something that was underneath him, and he was trying to club down with his gun barrel.

It took Bill another minute to comprehend what had happened. Old Handout was under Lyman with his legs wrapped around the big man while he fought to keep the gun barrel from smashing his head.

Bill had gone up that slope fast, but he went down it faster. The men at the fire were still too surprised to go for their guns. Bill made for them and not for Lyman and Handout.

His left fist drove a man back, and his right hand scooped a gun from a holster at the same time.

He saw a man in front of him, and he saw the man's hand grab at his gun. Bill Lane didn't know he had fired until he saw the man jerk back, stiffen erect, then sag down at the knees and sprawl face downward into the fire.

He jabbed his gun out in front of him, but the two men who faced him had their hands in the air and were edging back. Bill tried to keep them in front and reach Lyman at the same time.

He heard a wheezing cry and saw Alf Lyman roll from on top of Handout. Bill couldn't keep from grinning then. Old Handout had pulled a trick out of the sack then and had gotten his knee into Lyman's groin and heaved. Lyman's gun was on the ground out of either man's reach.

"I'd start reachin' for the sky, sheriff—" Bill bit off his words. Handout's growl cut him short.

"Keep your oar out of this, Bill. Me and this varmint's got somethin' to settle personal like."

Handout's head was down, and his fists were ready when he plowed into Lyman. Lyman doubled up like a closed jackknife, and a fist caught him in the jaw and straightened him again.

AFTER that it came close to being a case of murder. Old Handout grunted with every blow he threw out, and every blow landed solidly. Alf Lyman was a blubbering mass of fat when he slumped onto the ground and stayed there.

"What do you think of it, Bill?" old Handout Jim Small shrilled. "Guess when we sister up we can still do a man's job, eh? Guess we can hand this bunch right over to the governor on a platter, with a lot of the cash they lifted to garnish it, eh? What d' you think, figure there might maybe be some nice soft job like sweepin' out the governor's office up at Boise, for an old codger like me?"

Bill Lane scratched his neck very thoughtfully. "Wouldn't be surprised," he grinned. "Yeh, I reckon you and me could engineer that all right."

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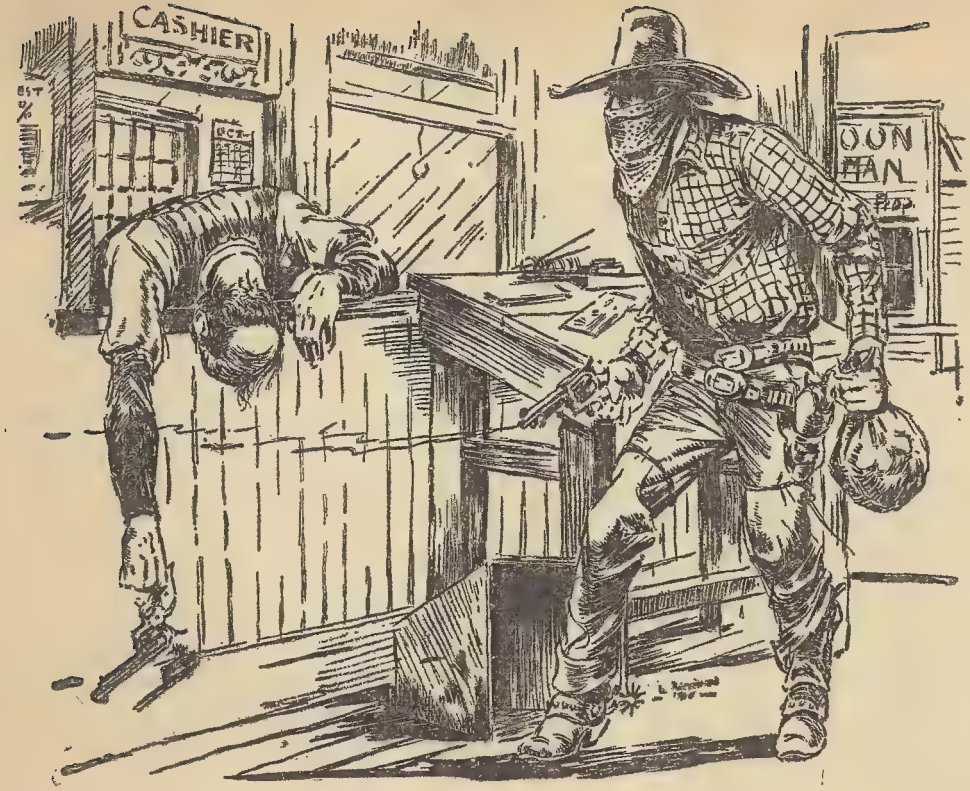

Renegades Shouldn't Be Rustlers

by SHERMAN BAKER

When a gent's a prosperous bank robber, he ought to be satisfied . . .

THE big rider swung his sweat-lathered roan stallion out of the barrance and headed up for the mountains. His red-rimmed eyes swept the jagged skyline above him. Above the timber-line the naked spine of the mountain range pierced through its scrub-wooded flanks and rose in sun-blasted, weirdly-eroded granite shapes. And at the summit of the huge vertical cliff was a deep cleft. This was his land-mark—at the entrance to this gully, hidden in the rocks and piñones, was the hideout cave he had stocked last week. The rider looked down at the bulging sack thonged to his saddle and his thick, sagging lips twisted in a sinister smile of triumph.

Four hours ago he and his partner had dashed out of the Red Rock Bank, followed by whistling lead. The owner of the bank, back of the cage, had brought out a scatter-gun and had shot his partner. But before he could trigger the

second barrel the big rider had thrown a hot slug square between his eyes, and the little man had collapsed, dead before he hit the floor. The onlookers had made it plenty hot for the lone owl-hooter, and his horse had stopped lead just as he was about to climb into the saddle. So he had swung up on the nearest horse—the banker's horse—clutching the sack of paper money, and had high-tailed it out of town. Luck had been with him, as the banker's mount was a fast, strong-lunged stallion that had easily outdistanced the pursuers. And it had stood up well under the gruelling race across the desert toward the foothills. It had only just begun to falter.

The hard-faced rider raked the roan's already-bleeding sides, prodding it on relentlessly. The muscles bunched under the animal's shoulders, and it struggled obediently up the first sharp incline into the mountains.

Suddenly the big rider reined in the panting horse. A faint sound came to his ears from ahead. The man's rust-flecked eyes narrowed and his knotted jaw hardened. With his dark face, heavy-lidded eyes, sagging cheeks and half-opened mouth he seemed like some great aged vulture waiting for its victim to die. He was dressed in ordinary range clothes, with black Stetson, faded Levis, and scuffed cowboots. His six-gun was worn low, and was strapped to his thigh, its cartridge belt half empty. He was covered with sweat and dust and there was a dark-red crusted stain on one sleeve that stuck to his skin. His broad shoulders stiffened, and his hand went down to the big forty-five in his holster as he steered the roan stallion behind a large clump of yucca. He listened again, thick lips parted.

The sound came again, clearer. There was no mistaking it—it was a man singing. There was a creak of leather and a *clop-clop* of hoofs as another horseman came into view. The big man eyed him narrowly, his thumb on the hammer of his pistol. The stranger was a boy of about seventeen, his fresh, corn-colored hair glinting in the sun. He wore no gun, and seemed as carefree as a yearling calf. He approached, singing a cowboy ballad, unaware of the big rider behind the yucca. But suddenly his horse sensed the presence of the other horse, pricked up his ears and nickered. The young waddy stopped his song, caught sight of the broad-shouldered rider and reined in his horse.

"Howdy," he said, showing white teeth in a friendly smile.

THE big man slid his gun slowly back into leather and reined his roan out into the open. He looked the young boy over from head to foot. He saw a slightly-built, but lean and stringy, young cowpuncher with a smooth-shaven, sunburned blond face, and boyishly twinkling blue eyes. The youngster spoke again.

"Where yuh headed, stranger?"

"What's thet tuh you, button?" the big man snarled.

He looked at the young waddy's horse. It was a strong, wiry little cow pony that would stand up. His own horse was nearly all in. An idea came to him. He would take the youngster's horse, and then shoot the boy. He didn't want the posse to get any first-hand information as to his whereabouts up here. He had left a clear trail down in the valley, but it wouldn't be easy to throw them off up here in rocky terrain. And the boy was headed down toward town and would meet them soon. But he would stall the boy off a bit, and make certain that he had no hide-out gun. The boy was speaking again.

"Aw, it don't mean nothin' tuh me atall, hombre! Reckon mebby yuh kin be headed plumb tuh hell, far's I'm concerned! Can't a fella pass the time o'

day with yuh? I ain't gonna hurt yuh. Can't yuh see I ain't got no gun, anyway?"

"Yeah, I see. Yuh're too young tuh pack one, at thet!"

"Don't think I can't shoot one, big hombre! I'm not so slow on the draw! Thet's why my ol' man won't let me pack one now. Says it gets me inta trouble all the time. Mebby he's right. Reckon mebby I'd be playin' a tune on it right now, if I had it! Say hombre, thet's a right smart-lookin' hoss yuh got there. Where'd yuh git him?"

"Button, yore paw didn't learn yuh much when he took yore sparker away from yuh. This hoss come with me from Texas, but thet ain't none of yore business!"

"Aw right, big hombre, aw right! Don't git proddy. How's fer th' makin's?"

A gleam came into the rust-flecked eyes of the big man.

"Button, if yuh like tuh smoke, help yoreself. A trail-loco smart-alec like you won't live long tuh enjoy many more!"

He pulled a bag of tobacco out of his pocket and handed it toward the young cowboy. He would shoot the kid while he was busy rolling a cigarette. The youngster smiled again and rode over alongside the dark-faced man. He reached out for the little tobacco-sack. As he did he bent over and like a charging grizzly, both arms spread, lunged at the big man. With an oath the big man swung away, his right hand streaking for his gun, amazement and anger staining his dark face.

But the boy had been too quick for him. The man lost his stirrups, swayed in the saddle. Before he fell, he thumbed the six-gun. It roared against the youngster's shirt, ripping away the cloth and burning like the drag of a hot branding iron on the boy's flesh, but doing no more than to crease a rib. Struggling madly, they both fell clear of the rearing horses, and rolled on the ground, arms and legs flailing wildly. The smoking gun clattered on the nearby rocks.

THE big man was as tough as a range bull, and the youngster hadn't a chance against him. But it was over sooner than either of them realized. The kid suddenly whirled away free from the big man and leaped for the gun. He had it in his hand, and had the big hammer thumbed back before the other could reach him. The dark-faced man halted in his roaring charge, frozen before the blue-steel yawn of the cocked gun before him.

He was breathing in painful gasps as he faced the slim, yellow-headed ranny behind the gun-barrel. The big man's thick lips were parted, his ugly face mottled with dark red. He controlled himself with obvious effort, and his flecked eyes gleamed craftily. His panting voice was sinuous, innocent.

"What . . . what's the matter . . . with yuh, button? I ain't done nothin' tuh yuh . . . I ain't done . . . nothin'!"

The slim young waddy was breathing hard too. He waited a moment or so and spoke, his voice edged like a sharp knife now, his blue eyes no longer boyish, but cold with frosted ice.

"Mebby not, big hombre! But I'm takin' yuh back tuh Red Rock. Reckon mebby I wanta find out how yuh happen tuh be ridin' my ol' man's roan stallion!"

Buck a Pat Hand—and Die!

by ERIC THANE

Author of "Ex-Outlaws Make Good Lawmen," etc.

"WHEEL 'EM" BREDEEN didn't like the looks of the Remington muzzle that bored at him from the brush, but he saw no wisdom in indicating to the holder of the rifle that the ambush had been discovered. So, his long body doubled at the hips and his loose-jointed ankles buckled under him redskin-fashion, he continued the curious card game he'd been at for the last half hour.

He divined that his least move from the position he was in might slap lead through him, and to calm his nerves he kept up a low-voiced monologue with two toads squatted in the grass.

"Yes, sir, Plentywood gulch looked good to me. Only timber an' sweet water on the trail. But it don't seem so good now, with that gun lookin' plumb hostile!"

His fingers shuffled and slapped out the cards, five at a time.

"Yes, sir, frogs, you look surprised at me settin' here an' dealin' out pat poker hands jest for myself! An' sometimes I'm a little surprised myself! But it's this-a-way, frogs: down in Utah they figured me a right top-hand poker man, with plumb astonishin' luck. Me, I'd draw full houses an' straight flushes an' think nothin' of it. Got so I believed I was under a lucky star!"

When Wheel 'Em Bredeen hunkered there in Plentywood Gulch trying to pat-hand a royal flush, he didn't know he was dealing himself into a bullet-swept range feud—with a pretty girl the queen in that murder-marked hate deck!

Eyes slitted by faint wind-driven wrinkles shot a cautious look at the muzzle, lurking there like a poison snake in wait. Then the low monologue went on.

"Then one day I sat down to a high-stake game with a pair of riders I knew was honest. I opened, an' them riders threw in their hands an' I dealt 'em new

ones. Frogs, I gave 'em both royal flushes! Royal flushes, a pair of 'em, stripped off the deck one card right after the other! Kind of busted me up, that did. It ended my luck. Put me on the downgrade. Got so I couldn't draw a pair. So I swore I'd never wheel a card again with livin' man until I'd dealt myself a pair of royal flushes. I got the feelin' that if I ever do that my luck'll come back!"

"Wheel 'em" reshuffled the deck and slapped cards viciously against a rock which served as playing table. The toads became interested in a swarm of deer flies, and drifted off. Bredeen stiffened suddenly, straining his look sidewise while keeping his face stolidly to the front.

The Remington disappeared, and a faint motion of brush indicated the retreat of the ambusher. For perhaps fifteen minutes he'd been making sure that Bredeen did not move from his camp. Why?

"I reckon Plentywood gulch is unhealthy, all right!" Bredeen mused aloud. "Maybe I better hightail out of here while there ain't any guns watchin' me—"

A shot boomed down the gulch, evidently from a spot not many hundreds of yards away, and a woman's voice wailed with such fright that Bredeen came to his feet like a jack-in-the-box. He paused only to stuff the cards into a pocket of his faded khaki shirt and to loosen his gun. Then he headed for the shot and scream.

He moved his long, loose-jointed body with all the grace of a hobbled horse or an animated scarecrow, but he covered ground with surprising speed. And determination. A watcher might have laughed at his awkward gait, but laughter would have cut short at the tensity of his jaw and flash of stony, colorless eyes.

He broke into a narrow park at the same instant that a trio of riders appeared along a trail which cut through it. But he didn't notice the horsemen. His intense look fixed instantly on two figures in the shadows of the cottonwoods along one edge. A man and a girl, the man rigid in the grass with evident death.

The faint voice of the girl wailed in Bredeen's ears, "Day, oh, Day, you can't be dead! Day!"

THEN the three riders pulled up and the foremost, peep-eyed and iron faced, rasped out, "Wall, if it ain't Day Hope an' Silkie Worden! An' looks like Day is plumb deceased! An' that ain't unusual, I reckon—considerin' how Day Hope an' Silas Worden are haters from away back! Reckon this is the end of a feud!"

The girl jerked upright, white face flaring whiter. She was only a handful for size, but the fury with which she hurled her words at the peep-eyed and iron-faced man made her seem big.

"You mean—you think I killed Day Hope! I didn't! We've known each other well for a couple of months, and we've been meeting here! I—I always had to sneak away from Dad, because Dad hated Day so! And today—somebody shot from the brush—"

"Nice story!" the peep-eyed man jeered, "Only it don't hold water!" He slipped from his saddle and jerked a .38 Smith & Wesson from the holster at the girl's waist. His fingers shuttled with the cylinder.

"Thought so! Three empty ca'tridges! One of them killed Day Hope! Reckon you lured him here and killed him! Lucky we came along here huntin' strays!"

"Tip Malm, that's not so! Those empty shells—I shot at a coyote—"

"Me an' Gay, here, an' Pondera, we saw what we saw, Silkie! Circumstances are enough to send you to

prison! Plain shootin' you might get by with, but lurin' a man for the purpose of killin'—wall, that's bad!"

Bredeen, unnoticed, stood awkwardly shifting his weight from one knee to the other as was his habit. His eyes he kept lowered and veiled, but he saw everything. Especially the rifle strapped between the leg and saddle of the man called Pondera. The girl's look swung suddenly to him.

"That man! He came out of the brush! He's the killer!"

"Aw, ma'am, I didn't even know the man!" Bredeen said placatingly, startled by the accusation. "I had no reason to kill him. Didn't even know the hombre, an' you have to have reasons to kill somebody!"

"You're just trying to rid yourself of suspicion by acting innocent! Who are you?"

"'Wheel 'em' Bredeen from Utah, ma'am! Down on my luck an' driftin' north. Plentywood gulch looked like good campin', so I laid over here."

The peep-eyed Tip Malm grinned derisively. "I've heard of you! Swore you'd not play poker again until you'd drawed two cold royal flushes. Kind of looney, I reckon!"

The man with the rifle, Pondera, echoed, "Looney, all right!" Bredeen didn't like him. His teeth were bunched together in the front of his mouth, giving his face a beak-like outline. A fist could flatten that outline, Bredeen thought as he absently smoothed his knuckles with his palm.

"Reckon we'll take you to your Dad, Silkie!" Malm said, "He ought to hear all about this! We'll send someone for Hope's body! Let's ride!"

"And let that man, that Bredeen, get away? He's—he's the real murderer!"

"Reckon not, Silkie!" Malm said. "Evidence is piled on you! Shucks, that's just 'Wheel 'em' Bredeen. He's harmless. A little looney, from what I hear! He just happened to blunder in!"

Bredeen kept his eyes to the ground, carefully, to avoid clashing his look with any of the trio. Men didn't think him a fool any longer when they glimpsed his eyes.

"All right!" Silkie said wearily, "But you're letting the murderer go—"

Bredeen permitted himself to look squarely at her. Nothing but loathing and suspicion in her face. A beautiful face, too, regular of features, delicately browned, framed by rippling blond hair tucked at the ends behind small ears. Bredeen's heart stirred. She'd come to his shoulder if she stood beside him. And would make a very pleasant armful, her slenderness making her not at all difficult to hold. But small chance of that as long as she thought he was the killer!

The trio and their prisoner rode away, leaving Bredeen with the dead man. He talked aloud to the figure in the grass.

"Pondera had a rifle. He was the man who was coverin' me. I reckon Malm an' him an' that Gay had fixed to kill Day Pope, an' didn't want me blunderin' in! But why pin it on Silkie Worden?"

HE didn't hesitate, but headed back for camp and within a few minutes was pounding in pursuit of the party. His Utah jughead, awkward as the master but as swift, overtook the three men and the prisoner rapidly.

"Reckon I'll ride with you!" Bredeen called easily, to Malm.

"You ain't welcome! This ain't a picnic party!" Malm warned.

"Wall, I'd like to meet Silas Worden. I heard Silas was a big gambler before he turned ranchin'. Him an' me, bein' card wheelers, I figure we might compare notes—"

"Aw, all right!" Malm snapped,

"ride with us if you want to!"

Bredeen said to himself, "I got to watch out. Malm don't want me along but he's afraid he'll rouse suspicion if he forces me away! Lucky he don't know I saw that rifle aimin' at me! Wonder if it was him or Gay, there, or Pondera who did the killin'!"

"You say somethin'?" Gay snapped, in ill humor.

"Me? Just talkin' to myself!"

"Sounds like a looney who'd spend his life tryin' to draw a pair of royal flushes cold! Lucky you left Plentywood gulch. There's squirrels down there!"

The Worden spread loomed ahead. Bredeen recalled what he'd heard of Worden—an ex-gambler who had turned to cattle when his luck on the green tables broke. He'd got luck back when he dealt in steers instead of cards, and he'd built up an outfit that had line riders ranging as far north as Alberta.

Bredeen tagged close to Malm, who seemed very sure of himself, almost to the point of insolence. Silkie's arm in one dirty fist, he pulled her from the saddle and led her to the house. He flung back over his shoulder, "This is where you get off, Bredeen. I got business with Silas Worden. Private business!"

"But I want to see Silas right away!" Bredeen protested, weakly.

Silkie cut in, "If you want to come in, come in!" Bredeen sensed her anxiety. She was convinced he was the murderer, and she didn't want him to escape.

He intercepted the look that passed between Malm and Pondera, and he understood instantly the casual way Pondera moved in front of him. Out of Silkie's sight, and apparently by accident, the man intended to see that he didn't get in the room with Silas Worden. But Bredeen ducked, apparently blundered forward on awkward legs, and lurched through the door. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed the expression of fury on Pondera's face.

"Malm! What d'you want?"

The man seated at a roll-top desk looking over some legal papers jerked to his feet. He was tall, thin, and in contrast to his visitors, neatly dressed. The gambler's expressionless mask on his face told Bredeen that this was Silas Worden.

"Your daughter killed Day Hope. Me an' the boys run onto them!"

"Dad, I—" Silkie ran forward, threw herself against her father, "Dad, I've been meeting Day! Oh, I know how you hated him, but I couldn't help it! I—I believed I loved him! I—I don't think I did, now! But Dad, believe me! I didn't kill him! That man Bredeen—"

Malm cut in smoothly, "Bredeen's just a half-wit, taggin' us! Silkie killed Day Hope! Me an' Gay an' Pondera can swear to that! We'll swear to it! Unless—"

Worden collapsed in his chair. He looked old, crushed, in spite of the mask on his face.

"You three will swear that Silkie killed Hope?"

"There's the man who really killed him!" Silkie accused, her finger indicating Bredeen, "That's 'Wheel 'em' Bredeen! He looks innocent, but he isn't! He shot from the brush!"

Bredeen shifted from one big foot to the other. A smile he deliberately made silly and vacant split his face.

"I couldn't have killed him! No court'd convict me! I didn't even know the hombre, an' you got to have reasons to kill a man!"

"That's right!" Malm snapped, "Bredeen, get out! Why you keep taggin' us, I don't know! Get out and chase butterflies!"

"Don't move!" Worden warned. "Maybe there's somethin' to this!"

Malm snarled angrily, "I told you

me an' the boys as good as seen Silkie kill Day Hope! We'll swear to it, an' knowin' the story of your feud, any court in the country'd call her guilty! An' we will swear she's guilty! We'll testify at her trial! Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"You own Plentywood gulch. It's plenty valuable. Only wood in the country. Just give me a bill of sale for it! I'm payin' you one dollar for it!"

HE held up, between thumb and soiled forefinger, a single silver coin, which he flipped forward on the desk. Silver jingled through the silence.

"Make out a bill of sale for Plentywood gulch. An' we never saw Silkie kill Day Hope!"

Bredeen's breath exploded violently. Things were clear, now. He sat down at a small table and automatically began to lay out cards.

Worden said, slowly, "That's a hand I can't buck, Malm! All right! For one dollar I'll sell you Plentywood gulch!"

Tears flooded Silkie's eyes and beaded down her cheeks. She made a sound of protest and attempted to get the pen her father lifted, but he pushed her aside. Her voice strangled incoherently. Bredeen's heart thundered. The gloss of mist over her eyes made them even more beautiful than before, and the poignancy of her appearance roused hot anger against these three men who had framed her.

"Dad, you've said the gulch and the wood was your most valuable possession! Don't sell it! Can't you see? The real murderer is here—"

"An' it's you! But we're keepin' still!" Malm said slowly.

"Girl, it's a hand I can't bluff!" Worden whispered.

His pen scratched, and the slip of paper he filled out he handed to Malm. With a touch of the sardonic he fingered the dollar. At a nod from their boss, Gay and Pondera came forward, to sign the bill of sale as witnesses.

"Make it square an' legal!" Malm grunted.

Bredeen strolled forward. His big feet tripped, and he grinned in his most vacant way. Then like a darting snake his fingers lashed forward, to jerk the paper from Malm's loose grip. Swiftly he backed off. His empty hand dropped to his gun, and the weapon flipped up in menace.

"Freeze!" he said coldly, "I don't take kindly to monkey business! An' this is certainly prize monkey business!"

For the first time he looked squarely into the eyes of the men. Pondera's dark face drained to a dirty white. Bredeen just stood there, as he'd stood before, shifting weight from one loose knee to the other, and with a vacant smile on his face. But the smile was frosted over now, and the full impact of his stony eyes took the men like a blow.

"He ain't looney!" Gay gasped, mouth wide with astonishment and fright.

"Sane enough to know a pack of coyotes when I see 'em! Malm, you or one of the boys found out about Silkie meetin' Hope, an' you saw the chance to use that to get the gulch! You killed Day Hope! Then you rode into the scene, accidental-like—"

"You're crazy!" Malm burst out.

"You know, Malm! An' now, I got this bill of sale. It's good. But it ain't good until you get it, Malm! An' I'm goin' to tear it up!"

"Better stop him, Silas!" Pondera warned, "Stop him if you don't want Silkie to get into trouble!"

Bredeen saw Worden slant a look at Malm. Maybe he was thinking the same thing Bredeen was. But fear for Silkie kept his mouth shut.

Bredeen shook his gun. "I don't like coyotes, two legged or otherwise! I'm tearin' up this paper, an' if anythin' happens to Silkie, I'll swear that you three framed her!"

"That's funny! Haw — haw!" Malm's voice boomed out in laughter, "D'you figure anybody would take you serious, Bredeen? Especially up here where you ain't known except as a little looney? Nobody'd believe you!"

That might be true. Bredeen's eyes narrowed to slits. He was a little bewildered, undecided on what to do. He'd acted on impulse in taking the paper from Malm, and in drawing his gun. Now, with three murderers itching for gunplay, an ex-gambler he could not be sure of, and a half-pint little beauty hostile to him, he was in a yellowjacket's nest that was liable to split any moment.

And split it did, but not from the source he'd anticipated. Silkie had edged away, beyond sight, and he'd let her go with the idea that she was not particularly dangerous. But suddenly her voice, decisively cold, cut in. "I've got you covered, Bredeen! Drop that gun easy! And you're going to town with me as the murderer of Day Hope!"

Bredeen's indecision vanished. He called out to Malm. "I got the bill of sale! You can't make another! This one's the only one that's legal, an' I've got that!"

THEN his gun exploded, but not with deadly intent. Lead smashed across Worden's desk. In the little room the crack of powder intensified into a thunder-clap. It served its purpose, which was to disconcert the girl and shake the nerves of the three drawing men. Silkie's bullet hummed wide, and Bredeen had hurled himself out of the door, the bill of sale still in his hand, by the time Malm and his partners had pulled their guns.

He raced for the Utah jughead and spilled into the saddle. Gun-thunder broke out behind him, and lead hissed spitefully by him. The jughead stretched his belly close to the ground, and prairie sped by like a blur. Bredeen went a quarter of a mile before he pulled up. Three riders pounded out in pursuit.

Bredeen laughed. With the big start he had, there would be no difficulty in evading the pursuers. He backtracked and cross tracked, leaving a trail which would have baffled the most expert trailer. Then he laid up in a coulee and tried to decide what to do.

A jackrabbit was his audience this time.

"Jack, listen to me an' see if I ain't right. Malm wanted the gulch. He found out Silkie was meetin' Hope. He made plans to kill Hope. An' there I was, camped near the rendezvous spot, an' to make sure I wouldn't interfere he had me watched. Wall, he's got Plentywood gulch now. Only, he ain't got it until he gets this paper from me. An' he'll be spillin' out over the prairie lookin' for me!"

He mused a moment, then went on, "Silkie thinks I killed Hope. Silas, I reckon, figures Malm might have done it, but he can't say nothin' on account of Silkie. Anyway, his suspicions are fifty-fifty between me an' Malm. An' with Malm out scoutin' the prairie for me an' the paper, I reckon, come night, I better sneak back an' have a talk with Silas Worden!"

Automatically he reached for his cards, then remembered he'd left them in Worden's room. He waited impatiently for dusk, and at the first hint of it rode towards the Worden spread. It was night when he got there. He cached the jughead under a cutbank and skulked towards the ranchhouse.

There was a light in one of the rooms, and Bredeen used that as a guide. He

reached the window and peered in. The room appeared deserted. Bredeen dropped down into the shadows and crept stealthily to the door. He lifted a fist to knock on it, then paused to glance into the dark. The possibility that Malm might be around occurred to him, but logically Malm should be out on the range after him.

The door swung open under his signal, and Silkie Worden stood there. Bredeen gasped. Beautiful she had been that afternoon in riding clothes, but tonight, in woman's dress, with her hair fixed and the fright gone out of her eyes she was enough to stun him.

"You! What do you want here?"

"I got to see your father. I've got to talk—"

She motioned to him, and led him into the room where that day Worden had signed away possession to Plentywood gulch. There, in the yellow lamplight, she faced him.

"Dad went to town to see his lawyer. But what you've got to say to him you can say to me!" She talked tightly, as if she couldn't catch her breath. Bredeen divined that she was scared. He laughed shortly, stripped off his gun and flung it on the table where were scattered his cards.

"Don't be scared! You can go for that gun!"

"What—what have you to say?"

She disconcerted him, both because of her beauty and because of the mad rush of his heart, but he said steadily, "I wanted to give Silas back this bill of sale. There ought to be some way out of this mess! You believe I killed Day Hope, don't you? And I know Malm or one of his partners did! I—"

"You killed Day Hope!"

"I'd like to change your mind on that!" he pleaded. "Please listen, Silkie! I didn't know Hope! I had no reason to kill him! Any jury would tell you that!"

Then he stiffened. The sound of the opening door was faint as the rattle of a mouse, but it stiffened him to the imminence of danger. Silkie screamed faintly. Bredeen turned. Malm stood there, gun in hand, and behind him crowded Gay and Pondera.

"Figured you'd come here!" Malm snapped. "An' I figured you'd figure I was out on the range! So we sneaked back! We missed you outside! I didn't want Silkie to see us get you, but no help for that now!"

HE came forward, close to Bredeen, and ran his hands through the other's pockets. With a grunt of triumph he drew forth the bill of sale.

"Where yore dad?" he snarled at Silkie.

"He—he thought you wouldn't come here again, and he went to town to see his lawyer!"

Pondera jerked. "That's talkin'!" he accused.

"Reckon Worden won't say too much! He was just tryin' to find loopholes!" Malm grunted. He jerked his look around to Bredeen. "Bredeen, you're gettin' in our hair! We're a-goin' to get rid of you!"

"Scared?" Bredeen heard himself jeer. "I know too much, don't I?"

The man avoided the accusation. He said to Silkie, "This is plumb painful, Silkie, seein' us get rid of a man, but you'll keep still about it! Just as you're keepin' still how we got Plentywood gulch! Don't forget yo're a murderer, an' don't let your dad forget it, either! An' tryin' to find loopholes in the law, with his lawyer, won't help him! "

Bredeen felt sweat break out all over him. His eyes fixed on the card-littered table, in the center of which his gun, holster, and cartridge belt lay. He took an experimental step forward but froze when Pondera poked a gun hard into his ribs.

"Easy, Wheel-'em!"

Then, his head bursting with varied emotions, Bredeen heard Silkie Worden say, "This won't be painful, Malm! That man killed Day Hope, even if you think I did and could swear that I did! That man deserves to die! I want him to die! Kill him!"

Bredeen swung his white look on her, but her eyes evaded his. All at once her beauty seemed to have disappeared. She was savage. Bredeen sickened. That she hated him, he knew, that she could so savagely want his death hadn't occurred to him.

"He killed Day Hope and I loved Day! Give me a gun I'll help you kill him!"

Malm applauded, "Sure, that's the spirit! But we'll do the shootin', me an' Gay an' Pondera! We'll take care of him!"

Bredeen dropped his look, and grinned again his silly grin. But his eyes were alert, fixed upon that gun on the table.

"Wall, Bredeen, I reckon you've wheeled yore cards for the last time!" Pondera said, "For the last time! Come on, Bredeen, you're ridin' out on the prairie with us!"

"Yep, no more cards for Wheel 'em Bredeen," Gay contributed.

The girl had slumped in the chair before her father's desk, but now she stirred. Her voice cut thinly through the room, "Give him one more chance to try for his pair of royal flushes, Malm! That'll make him suffer more!"

Malm's big voice burst out in ironic laughter. "Sure! Why not?" He laughed again, apparently with an idea. "Tell you what, Bredeen! You lay out them cards an' if you lay out two royal flushes we'll turn you loose!"

Gay and Pondera echoed the laughter of their boss. The room shook to an inferno of ghastly laughter. Even Silkie's tones cut in.

Pondera forced Bredeen to the table. Deliberately he waited until the other man almost had his hands on the gun there, then he snatched it away.

"Figurin' on that, Bredeen?"

Bredeen had been, but his face betrayed none of his disappointment. He stacked the cards and fumbled them between his fingers.

"All right, shuffle them!" Malm snarled, "An' lay out your royal flushes! Lay 'em out, two of 'em, one after the other, an' you go free! Go ahead! This is your last chance to do what you been tryin' to do for a couple of years!"

There was other laughter now, but it was Bredeen's humorless gurgle. He was tempted to fan the cards violently into Malm's face but the irony of the situation halted him. One last chance to do what he'd sworn to do before he played poker with any man again! And this time it was for his life!

"Sure, I'll lay them out!" he said easily.

Silkie cut in, "Let me shuffle them, Bredeen! I'll bring you bad luck!"

"Or good!" Bredeen returned, handing the deck over to the girl.

She fumbled and fumbled with them, reshuffling time and again, and not until even Bredeen had grown impatient did she return them, with the remark, "They're certainly shuffled if any cards ever were!"

"For my life!" Bredeen said, flipping a card face up on the table. The king of diamonds.

"Good beginnin'!" Pondera commented, crowding close. The beak-like outthrust of his bunched front teeth was close to Bredeen.

BREDEEN flipped another card. The ace of diamonds. Another, the queen of diamonds. "Good so far!" he heard himself jeer.

Then quickly he wheeled the next

two cards. A jack and ten of diamonds stared at him. A royal flush!

Malm's face turned purple, and he gurgled something about luck. Bredeen laughed. One chance in perhaps a billion to catch another royal flush!

He discounted Malm's promise to release him if he won. The man had been positive he wouldn't win.

"Wheel 'em!" he called, and flipped up the next card. A ten of spades lay blackly against the table.

"'Spades is bad luck!" Gay put in.

Bredeen stripped off another card. The king of spades. And another. The queen of spades. He faltered. In the thousands of hands he'd been playing he had never got this far. Why now? It would be bitter irony if he did make his pair of royal flushes in the last minute of his life.

He wheeled another card, and with pounding heart saw the jack of spades turn up. Malm leaned forward, his knuckles white. Gay stared open-mouthed. And Pondera's eyes glazed with the intensity of his attention.

"Lady luck, give me an ace of spades!" Bredeen implored aloud.

He stripped the card from the deck and dropped the deck. For an instant he held the card, burning in his palm. Then slowly he flattened it out.

The ace of spades. Two royal flushes lay on the table.

The three watchers seemed turned to stone. Astonishment held them rigid and inattentive to Bredeen. And Bredeen took advantage of it. He went into action.

His fist smashed into Pondera's mouth, and he felt teeth give under the impact. Pondera staggered back. He dropped his gun. Bredeen swooped for it, and before he straightened his index finger had gone tight over the trigger.

Gay's open mouth closed. He was so close that Bredeen could glimpse the round hole in his shirt, with powder burns across it. He crumpled against the table and rolled to the floor.

Bredeen took a step back, hauling away at the trigger. In the little room powder thunder rolled until it was eardrum shattering. Pondera, his bloody mouth open to spit out broken teeth, went down over the body of Gay. He quivered for an instant before he stilled.

Malm's gun boomed, but without effect. The pair of royal flushes apparently had unnerved him. His second shot went wild, like the first.

"Let me go if I make the cards behave, eh?" Bredeen gritted. "Malm, I ain't takin' a chance you'll welch on your promise. An' Malm, you killed Day Hope, didn't you?"

"Sure I did! I'm givin' you lead, Bredeen!"

His gun missed for the third time. But Bredeen fired until his Colt was empty. With the last shot Tip Malm slumped to his knees. He died hard, trying to hold himself from the floor by grasping the edge of the table with uplifted hand. But his fingers loosened, and he flattened out. For an instant there was a gurgle of sound, then silence swooped down on the room.

Bredeen dropped the gun with a clank of sound and bent over Malm's body. He rifled the pockets to find the bill of sale. This he flung on the table, in the pool of light around the lamp which bullets had missed.

"You heard what he said!" he burst out harshly, to Silkie. "He killed Day Hope!"

"I—I suspected that!" Silkie came forward, to stand close to him. "I thought he might have when Dad told me, before he left for town, that things looked suspicious! And when you came here tonight, and told me that you hadn't done it, I knew it couldn't be

anybody but Malm or one of his partners! I—"

Bredeen cut in, harshly. "That's your story! You wanted to see me killed! You wanted Malm to kill me!"

Bredeen shivered, in spite of the fact that he was warm. He tried to keep his voice hard, but the nearness of the girl forced his heart to such a pace that he had difficulty in talking at all.

"You wanted to have me killed! You wanted a gun to help them—"

"Bredeen, do you believe that?" She was close against him now, her hands gripping his shirt. As he'd anticipated, she came only to his shoulder. "I—Bredeen, I knew you were innocent when you told me you were! There was something convincing in the way you said it! Then Malm came in. I—I had to pretend to get you out of that trap. I thought I'd get hold of a gun if I said I wanted to help shoot you! But Malm stopped that. And then, to stall for time, I suggested the cards! I—Bredeen, you believe me?"

BREDEEN had to make an effort to say no, and when the word did come it was without force.

"Malm said he'd let you go if you drew a pair of royal flushes. I didn't know if he meant it, but I thought I'd take the chance!"

"He didn't mean it. He figured I didn't have a chance to make that pair of flushes. What do you mean, you'd take the chance?"

"Dad was a great gambler. He taught me a lot of tricks. So I asked to shuffle the cards!"

Bredeen exhaled as if from a blow. "You mean them cards were stacked! You stacked 'em that way?"

"That's what I did, Bredeen!"

Bredeen jerked away from her, and went to the table. He scooped up the cards and dropped them to the floor.

"I've touched a card for the last time!" he said. "I spend years tryin' to draw flushes, an' the only time I get one that I think is honest is when the cards are stacked. Nope, I'm never touchin' a card again!"

He went straight back to her and put his arms around her. As he'd anticipated, she was neither too much of an armful nor too little. Just enough to hold comfortably against his shoulder.

"Reckon I got to believe you, Silkie!"

"I—I want you to so much, Wheel 'em! What a name, 'Wheel 'em'! You've got to get rid of that, now that you've given up cards!"

"Reckon it'll be hard, Silkie. I'm a man with one idea. Folks, some of 'em, think I'm plumb looney because of me stickin' to one idea, until I get it knocked out of me. Like me tryin' to draw two royal flushes because my pal did once in Utah!"

"I'm glad you're that way," Silkie whispered, "because I want to be your one idea from now on!"

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Bar-Window Brand

by JAMES R. WEBB

Mike Fallon wanted honorably to blot out the jail-bird brand he wore—but how can a man redeem himself with a whole rangeland against him, and lobo trigger treachery forcing him to buck the law!

YOUNG Mike Fallon's smoke-blue eyes swung upward from the whiskey-splashed table to stare through the dirty saloon-window at the clean, sage-covered slopes beyond. His big calloused fingers toyed with a jigger glass which looked ridiculously small and weak in that powerful grip. Lew Mustain's abrupt, staccato phrases came to him, dreary and foul as the air in this wretched little back-room.

"Jail-bird!" Mustain spat, his black little eyes burning like coals. "Wearin' the ol' Bar-Window brand, that's you! Think you can live it down? Like hell you can! They musta been feedin' you loco-weed over at Yuma, or you wouldn't be so plumb crazy!"

Mike Fallon's huge shoulders rolled loosely, as though trying to throw off the burden this spidery little man was heaping upon him. Once Fallon's reactions had been instantaneous; he either agreed with a man or knocked him down. Now he seemed dazed; the bright, clean-smelling world he had visualized from behind Yuma's bars had been only a mirage . . . that could be swept away with a word: Jail-bird!

He had learned that the moment he had stepped off the stage and asked Jeff Poulters, of the Four X, for a job. "I allus liked you, Mike," Jeff had said. "But I ain't hirin' no ex-convicts . . . not till they've proved they're on the straight-an'-narrow!" A half-dozen cowmen had given him the same answer, then Lew Mustain had heard he was in town, had dragged him in here with almost panicky haste.

From beyond the door leading into the bar-room proper came the sound of loud voices, raucous singing, and the tinny notes of a player-piano. Mustain's Sawdust House was doing a good business, though it was barely supper-time.

"Listen Lew," Mike Fallon said defensively. "I wasn't but seventeen when I got sent up. I ain't but twenty now. That's too young to be branded as a owlhooter. You know I wasn't never a real rustler, an' I ain't got no hankerin' that way now."

Mustain jerked a stogie from his thin lips and jabbed it toward the younger man as though it were the finger of doom. "You *was* rustlin', though! Don't make no difference whether a feller rustles for the money or the thrill, it's rustlin' either way . . . an' a jail-bird's a jail-bird!"

The whiskey jigger between Mike Fallon's fingers exploded into little pieces. He didn't notice the blood welling from tiny cuts in his thumb and forefinger.

"I'll drift down to New Mexico where nobody knows me then," he decided. "Reckon I could get me a job there. Them folks don't know nothin' about Yuma Prison."

LEW MUSTAIN smiled witheringly. "Huh! An' how would yuh get there? You ain't got no hoss . . . no saddle . . . no gun. You ain't even got anything to wear, 'ceptin' that five-buck suit the warden give yuh." His voice became persuasive. "But if you'll just show sense, I'll get you the best dam' rig in town. Here's a hundred dollar bill. Run down to Sam Worth's an' get yourself some duds an' a gun."

Mike Fallon shook his blond head. There was something terribly decisive about that gesture, but the saloon-keeper refused to give up.

"Look, how can you be so thick-headed? There's a big mine opened since you was here. The town's crawling with miners. The sheriff has his hands full keepin' 'em from tearin' the place down. He can't be bothered with stoppin' us from runnin' a few cows across the Border. We been doin' it steady for five years, an' we never got caught yet. Come on, I can use a big stiff like you."

Mike Fallon lifted his better than six feet of bone and muscle from the chair. The ill-fitting prison shoddy couldn't hide the lithe strength of him, the immense power of those broad shoulders. Lew Mustain looked like a dapper little spider beside him.

"Nope. I won't take rustlin' money. I was just a kid before, an' I fell for yore yarn about rustlin' them cows bein' the only way you could collect the money what was owed yuh. But I'm older now. There's still an outfit I ain't seen yet, the Slash B. I got good reason to think Smoke Beetles will give me a job, once he hears me."

Mustain's hand held an ugly little

derringer.

"You ain't walkin' out o' this room without you agree to work for me, savvy? I'm thinkin' yuh mebbe know too much to be runnin' 'round loose!"

"Put up that gun, Lew!" Mike Fallon said calmly.

"Not till you take that hundred!"

Mike Fallon wasted no time in argument. With dazzling speed his long arms went into action. Right fist jolted hard against Mustain's well-groomed head, left-hand slashed down and sideways against the derringer. The little gun blasted a furrow along the top of the table, then plummeted into a corner. Mustain staggered back against the wall, eyes filled with hate.

"You fooled me into three years in prison, Lew," Mike muttered, breathing hard. "An' pullin' that gun settles it. I'm runnin' you out o' town, if it's the last thing I do!"

The door burst open; a cheap chromo banged down from the wall with the shock of it. A wide-eyed bartender pointed a .45 at Mike Fallon. Cowpokes and dirty-bearded miners crowded in behind. A stocky, scar-faced deputy wormed his way through the press, two guns in his excited fists.

"Stop him, Mulkey!" Mustain shouted to the deputy.

"Skunk what just got outa Yuma tried to shoot me!"

"Lift 'em!" the deputy warned. "We don't 'low no gun-sneakin' rustlers!"

Fallon raised his hands. He was used to obeying the Law's commands. Three years had made the habit strong.

"String him up!" shouted Slake Baggot, a red-headed cowhand from the Slash B. "That's good rustler medicine!"

"Shore!" bellowed a miner, grinning. "That's the medicine!"

"What about it, Lew?" Mulkey asked uncertainly. "D'yuh want I should lock him up?"

MUSTAIN seemed to reconsider. He fingered a reddening welt along his high cheek-bone. "No," he said finally. "Let him go. We just had a little argument. Didn't mean nothin'."

But Mike Fallon realized that the damage was done. From now on, the town would consider him as worse than a one-time rustler; he would now be branded as a man who fought with a derringer . . . a sneak gun.

Without another word he walked out into the darkening street.

As he walked along the almost deserted board sidewalk he passed a vacant lot between the hardware store and the two-story Mansion House. A quick movement, a noise, or perhaps it was a sixth sense, warned him. His eyes flicked toward the trash-littered lot, and then he dropped.

With a deadly rustle a bullet cut the air where his chest had been an instant before. Barely had the frame buildings hurled back the sound of the first shot before they echoed to a second, and another slug glanced off the boards not an inch from Mike Fallon's hand. He rolled toward the flimsy protection of an old barrel standing just inside the boundaries of the lot, ears ringing to the shouts of miners and cowpokes tumbling into the street in answer to the shots.

He peered around the barrel, caught a glimpse of a man running up the alley in the rear. White shirt front, black coat . . . Lew Mustain! The gun blasted again; a bullet struck an iron hoop of the barrel, *zinged* off in a whining richochet . . . and hurled Mike Fallon into the roaring, light-streaked blackness of oblivion!

When vision came back to his pain-wracked eyes, he thought he must be looking into the face of some queer creature of another world. Thin, jutting beak, a rat-trap mouth, scraggly beard shrouding hollow cheeks . . . surely this

this was the face of some imp of the Devil. But no, the Devil's minions didn't have twinkling little eyes that seemed to radiate good humor, didn't have a breath that reeked of stale alcohol. Nor was Satan's cabin lighted by a flickering, smoky kerosene lamp.

Mike found that he was lying upon a ragged, straw-filled bunk. He sat up, shook his blond head to clear the cobwebs from his aching brain.

"Slug just clipped yuh behind the ear," the strange little man congratulated. "You're right as rain!"

"You brung me here?" Mike questioned.

"Shore. One o' them bullets hit my ol' pard square between the eyes. Then I seen you start kickin' around an' I knowed you'd stopped one. I seen my pard was past help, so I drug you away whilst the crowd was moonin' over pore Jerry. I thinks, thinks I . . . somebody's apt to finish the job if'n I leave that younker lyin' there. I didn't have to drag yuh more'n a foot, then yuh got up an' walked. You've got a skull like cement, Mike."

Mike Fallon was puzzled. "You know me?"

The little man was too busy toasting his lost pard to answer. He lifted a flask to his bearded lips, drank long and deep. "That's to yore memory, Jerry!" he saluted, then took another swig. "An' that's to the bartenders in the Happy Huntin' Grounds . . . they'll need encouragement, once yuh start to cadgin' drinks off 'em, Jerry!"

ANOTHER swallow, to himself apparently, then he replied to Mike's question. "Shore I know yuh. I was in the Sawdust House when Lew Mustain claimed yuh tried to shoot him with a derringer . . . only I reco'nized the gun as bein' his'n! Then me an' Jerry started down the street across from yuh. When the shootin' started an' Jerry dropped, I looked across to the alley an' seen Lew. He musta run down the alley from his place to bushwack yuh. Likely he don't care for yuh much."

Mike Fallon grinned bitterly, opening and closing his rocky fists. "Likely he don't."

"Well, when do we lift his scalp?" The little man extended a bony hand. "My name's Bat Pinner. Pleased to help yuh kill a murderin' skunk any day. Jerry was the best two-fisted panhandler in these parts . . . I don't take his killin' lightly, mister!"

Mike looked around the dilapidated little room, noted the double-deck bunk. "Jerry lived with yuh?"

Pinner's eyes watered; his voice choked up. "Yeah. He was a good spieler. He drummed up trade for me."

"Trade?"

"Uh-huh." Pinner picked up a club, the size and shape of a baseball bat. "I got throwed by a killer bronc five-six years ago. It wrecked me as a cowhand, but since then I ain't got no feelin' to speak of. So I let fellers whack me with this club, four bits a whack. Surprisin' how many folk's pay to whack a feller what ain't gonna whack back."

Mike felt quick sympathy, but his mind was racing. "Then you hang around saloons a lot?"

"Yep. Saloons are my home range, yuh might say."

"Reckon yuh could find a way to listen whenever Mustain talks to anybody?"

"Shore. Lew don't pay me no nevermind. Usually I'm a mite drunk, yuh might say."

"Well, listen, Bat. I'm pinin' to make good on this range. I can't do it till I prove I ain't crooked. The best way for me to do it . . . an' the best way for you to even up for Jerry's death . . . is to show up Mustain. He thinks I know too much to run loose. Trouble

is, I don't. I know he's runnin' a gang o' Mex vaqueros who drive the local cow critters into Sonora, but he ain't smart enough to be doin' it alone. He's frontin' for somebody; I learnt that much afore I got sent up. But I ain't shore who . . . an' I wanta make a real clean-up!"

Bat Pinner's little eyes gleamed. "That's talkin'! I picked yuh for a thorough-goin' jasper! An' who might that somebody be?"

"Well, if things ain't changed in three years, there's only two spreads what cut much ice here. The Bar Diamond . . . that's Joe Forster, and Smoke Bettles' Slash B. The Bar Diamond's got plenty cows an' the Slash B's got plenty water. Now I don't know nothin', 'ceptin' that Lew Mustain didn't get plumb murderous till I mentioned I had somethin' to say to Smoke Bettles over to the Slash B."

"Meanin' you figger Bettles might be the man behind the throne, huh? He's got water but his range ain't so rich . . . he could use a little extra dinero. Mustain figgered you knowed Bettles was the man an' you was gonna do a little blackmailin'. What did yuh know?"

Mike grinned. "Nothin'! I just had a letter to Bettles from the warden, recommendin' me as bein' reformed! But it looks like Mustain give the game away. Now the thing is for you to do some listenin'!"

BAT opened his mouth . . . but no words came. Both men froze to the sound of steel hitting rock, the soft jingle of spur-chains!

"Quick!" Bat whispered. "There's a blanket over the window . . . they can't see in. Come here!"

The little man dove beneath the doubledeck bunk, clawed at a trapdoor. "Somebody dug hisself a cellar here to keep his grub cool. Pile in! It's safe . . . Jerry was allus hidin' here. He was a mite light-fingered, Jerry was!"

Mike crawled under the bunk, slid down the trap, which was barely wide enough to admit his broad shoulders.

"Take this hawgleg," Bat offered, extending an old six-gun. "I won't need it . . . you might!"

The little man jumped to his feet at the sound of loud battering on the door. "Hold yore hosses!" he shouted ill-temperedly. "I'm a-comin'!"

Mike Fallon lifted the trapdoor an inch or so, watched booted feet clump into the room.

"Where's that jail-bird?" a harsh voice asked.

"What jail-bird, Mister Bettles?" Bat countered testily. "I'm a law-abidin' man, I am."

Another voice, more friendly, cut in. Mike recognized it as belonging to Joe Forster of the Bar Diamond. "Don't get riled, Bat. Slake Baggott said he seen you with him."

"Oh, yuh mean Mike Fallon? Heck, all I did was give him a hand. Last I seen, he was headin' for the brush."

This precipitated a general argument, all the voices joining in. Slake Baggott, one of Bettles' punchers, swore he had seen Bat leading Mike toward the shack. Bettles backed him up, but Joe Forster, who didn't seem to care much for Bettles or the Slash B, claimed Slake had probably been too drunk to recognize anybody.

Smoke Bettles lost his temper and slapped Bat Pinner half across the room. "You're lyin', yuh little shrimp! You know where Fallon is, an' there's been too blame much rustlin' goin' on to let a no-'count like him stay in town. He'd never o' come back here less'n he meant to start stealin' cows again. Besides, he's a trouble-maker. Since he hit town there's been two shootin's!"

Pinner laughed in his face, claimed

the slap hadn't hurt, because he had no feeling. Bettles' face grew purple with rage. Mike could barely restrain himself from going to the valiant little man's aid, but he knew this was no time to show himself.

Forster's dark face grew darker. Before the choleric Bettles could strike again, he grabbed him by the shoulder. "Lay off, Bettles! I got as much to say as you have, seein' as I been losin' stock too. I ain't sure Bat knows anything, an' I ain't for persecutin' Fallon nohow, not till I know he's back at the old game."

The blazing-eyed Bettles finally gave in, with much cursing. As the men left, Joe Forster lagged behind, whispered to Bat: "Mind yuh, I ain't sayin' yuh know where Fallon is, but should yuh see him . . . tell him I'm against ridin' a man for somethin' he did as a kid. I might give him a job."

When they had gone, Bat, cautious lest they come back and surprise him, sat on the bunk and whispered to Mike, still in the tiny cellar. "Looks like you're in a tough spot, boy. Mustain will have to keep tryin' to kill yuh, now that he's showed his hand. An' Bettles seems to have the same idea."

"Yeah," Mike agreed feelingly. "It looks like mebbe our hunch is right. Mustain musta told Bettles what I said about goin' to see him."

"It ties in, all right," Bat mused. "I've heard the bank's pressin' Bettles. He can't make the grade on water alone, his range is too blame racky an' sandy. Hardly no grass a-tall. No wonder he's rustlin'. He tried to lease some o' Forster's range, but Forster wouldn't play unless Bettles would let him have a water hole, which Bettles wouldn't. Ain't no love lost 'twixt them two. What d'yuh think about hittin' Forster for a job? Seems he's willin'."

"Nope. I figger to play it alone for a while. That is, with yore help, Bat."

MIKE chafed in hiding in the little shanty all the next day, while Bat Pinner took his club and plied his peculiar trade at Lew Mustain's Sawdust House. He returned at midnight, jubilant despite his bruises from countless whacks.

He smacked his lips over coffee of Mike's brewing, heavily laced with raw whiskey. "Things is lookin' up," he gloated. "In the first place, the sheriff's really lookin' into Jerry's killin', an' Lew Mustain's plumb scairt!"

Mike took his coffee plain. His rugged face showed the strain of inactive waiting. "That sounds good, but Lew's nothin' but a cheap little crook . . . I'm pinin' to hear about the ol' he-wolf hisself!"

"I'm comin' to that. Y'see, I played drunker'n usual, an' picked me a nice soft place on the floor right next to the partition closin' off Lew's office. Well, a Mex vaquero went in, an' I heard 'em talkin'. Lew tells him to go to the Boss an' tell him that things is too hot. Lew says he's 'bout to get charged with murder. He wants to make a real raid an' clear out."

Bat poured some whiskey into his cup. "By-an'-by," he continued. "I heard more voices. Somebody had come into Lew's office by the alley entrance. They didn't mention no names, an' I couldn't hear so good, but they talked about grabbin' a couple hundred head. Bettles' Slash B was mentioned, only I couldn't make out just what they said. But it still ties in. Bettles could be rustlin' from hisself to make it look good."

"When?"

"Tonight. They said somethin' 'bout Aguila Point. I figger that's where they cut the Border."

Mike thudded his big fists together. "An' we only got one gun an' no hosses an' no money! Here's our chance an' we can't take it!"

"Not much we can't!" Bat pulled off his shirt and displayed his bruises. "Them black-an'-blue marks netted me fifteen dollars tonight! That'll hire us two broncs, an' Ken Frazee down at the feed-yard will loan me a carbine. What d'yuh say?"

"Bat Pinner, if you wasn't so ugly, I could kiss yuh! By golly, we're on the trail back! If we get away with it, I can get me a job an' so can you. You won't be gettin' no more poundin's! Now get goin'!"

Forty-five minutes later, Mike met Bat at a dry wash half a mile from town. Bat was in proud possession of two leather-mouthed old jugheads and a worn and shiny .44-40 Winchester saddle-gun. Without delay, they lined out for the Border, ten miles away.

"Did yuh leave the note I told yuh to?" Mike asked, clenching his teeth against the jughead's hardrock gait.

"Yeah. It oughter work out. I left it under Mulkey's door. That pore deputy never gets home from watchin' the saloons before three o'clock in the mornin'. Time he gets it we'd oughter have the evidence all gathered for him. Bettles will be in the soup when the deputy rides up an' sees him in the midst of a stolen herd. That was a good idea o' yours. Mulkey wouldn't never o' let yuh go, if he'd known right off."

In silence they approached the rocky pinnacle known as Aguila Point. A mile or so in the distance, well over the International Line, they could see the light of a camp-fire. Mike knew from his single disastrous rustling experience, that the fire represented an encampment of Rurales. Lew Mustain had his arrangements well worked out; he picked a certain point on the Border, notified the Rurales in advance, and by the payment of a percentage, was assured of their protection in case the stolen cattle should be pursued by their rightful owners. No cattleman could follow his own cattle across the Border without the risk of a clash with the Rurales, in which he would play the illegal role of trespasser.

"We can leave our hosses in that little draw there," Mike decided, "an' climb up on the side of Aguila. We'll still be close enough to the broncs, in case we need 'em."

MIKE envied Bat Pinner's lack of feeling as they wedged themselves into a cluster of boulders on the hillside. Hard rock dug into his ribs; cactus spines prodded at him. But such minor discomforts were forgotten when their ears finally caught the distant sound of moving cattle, the faint calls of riders. Soon their nostrils twitched to the dusty odor of the drive, and two darker blotches became visible in the blackness.

"That big batch over yonder might be Forster critters," Bat whispered. "They'll just about have the two drives together when they hit the Border. It can't be more'n three o'clock now. What'll we do, fire a few shots into 'em to try to get 'em millin', so they'll still be on this side when Mulkey gets here?"

Mike Fallon looked up at the great vague river of the Milky Way. The stars looked friendly; he hoped they were. Two men weren't much when it came to busting up a rustling gang.

"I don't think so, Bat. We will if we have to, but the big thing ain't the cows . . . it's nailin' the king pin. Losin' a few cows is cheap if we can do that. See that little clump o' riders cuttin' over to the side, now that the two herds is closin' up? My idea is they're the jaspers we want . . . they ain't wearin' them round sombreros . . . they're Americans. Here's where you get back at Bettles for them slaps."

"You mean to sneak down there an'

try to hold them white men with a gun?"

"Yeah. If we get the leaders, we get 'em all. Let's go!"

But the faulty nervous system that made Bat impervious to feeling also made him a poor sneaker. His sense of touch and his sense of balance were poor. Before they had descended fifty feet, Bat had stepped on a loose rock and finished the rest of the trip in a whirling, rolling landslide of his own making. Rocks clattered, pebbles hissed in an ever-increasing roar. That one small man had started a fury of sound that split the night's silence like a thunderstorm!

Mike himself was caught in it. He ended up at the bottom in a jumble of rocks and brush and was surprised to find he still clutched the Winchester in a hard grip.

The point steer shook his head at the crashing roar, lowered his eyes and started off in mad terror. In an instant the rustled herd was in the grip of a wild stampede. Dust rose in a hovering cloud; sparks flickered as frantic hoofs pounded rock. High-pitched Mexican shouts tried desperately to pierce the din, restore sanity to insane animals.

Mike flung rock away from Bat's mauled body, found the little man unconscious. Desperately as he wanted to, Mike couldn't wait to investigate the injuries. All plan was gone now. By blind chance he must run down the leader of this gang! He streaked for the wash hiding his jughead.

With that excited animal wheezing beneath him, he headed for the right side of the herd, rightly surmising from the shots that the riders were there, trying to prevent the stampede from swinging away from the Border.

A rider cut across in front of him, six-gun blasting at the sky. Something about the figure's small size, the set of the shoulders, was familiar . . . Lew Mustain! Mike raked the jughead's flanks with his spurless heels, flayed him into a burst of speed. He swung alongside the saloon-keeper's bronc, reached out and grabbed the smaller man by the collar.

MUSTAIN'S eyes flamed with recognition of this blond giant; his six-gun jerked up . . . only to drop from a nerveless hand as the Winchester's barrel crashed against his skull!

"One!" Mike muttered, forging on through the dust, loud with the click of hundreds of horns. The herd was turning, heading for the Border, but suddenly came the staccato blast of pistol shots from the south. Once again, the stampede swung, tried to double upon itself. Abruptly, Mike saw horsemen bearing down upon him, racing before red-eyed slobbering steers that were seemingly beset with mad determination to sweep these puny men from their new course.

Mike jerked the jughead around, headed in a long angle of escape. Faster horses drew abreast. He saw high-crowned, round-brimmed Mexican sombreros, then the raking brim of a Stetson. The man in the Stetson was bellowing orders, his voice unrecognizable in the riot of sound. Could it be Smoke Bettles?

Disregarding the danger of the pounding hoofs fast approaching, Mike slowed, swung toward the other man.

"This way!" he yelled. "There's a wash dead ahead!"

Instinctively the man followed Mike's lead to escape the new menace. The vaqueros didn't hear; they continued forward. Mike's stratagem had worked; he had his quarry alone. Again the herd veered, started to mill. For the moment that danger was past. The man in the Stetson realized it; in the lull, he began to wonder at the identity of the stranger who had warned him. Mike's

size betrayed him.

"Mike Fallon!" With the words, a six-gun spat, a tongue of flame . . . the pommel broke into bits not two inches from Mike's waist.

Mike flung up the Winchester, squeezed the trigger. A chill wave swept over him . . . the landslide battered gun refused to function! Another shot burnt through the shoddy tail of his coat. Mike kicked the jughead's ribs, grasping his only chance. Square into that other horse he rode, closing just as a slug pierced his right forearm, a piercing pain that was soon forgotten in the shock as the two animals met.

Mike swung the Winchester. The other man dodged, fired. Mike's ribs splintered as a bullet just missed the tip of his right lung . . . and then his arms closed around his opponent's body, all their strength flowing into a bone-crushing hug. The horses reared, pawed . . . and the two men crashed to the ground between them.

Mike never felt the shock; his fists were too busy. All his pent-up rage at the persecution his prison record had brought him, all his determination to redeem himself was behind those blows. It was seconds before he realized that his job was done; the man below him was still. He peered into the battered face . . . those dark features didn't belong to Smoke Bettles! His fists had been thudding into the body of the owner of the Bar Diamond . . . Joe Forster!

The surprise, the loss of blood, was too much for his bullet-shocked body. Mike Fallon sprawled unconscious across the insensible body of the man he had exposed!

The sound of excited voices lifted the veil from his mind. Voices that seemed far away beat against his ears, expelled the red-streaked blackness from his brain. In time he realized that hands were bandaging his wounds, recognized the voice of Mulkey, the deputy, and another voice, the high-pitched gleeful tones of Bat Pinner!

"Open them eyes, Mike," Bat was urging. "We scotched 'em, we did. An' guess who's thankin' us . . . Smoke Bettles! Smoke's got it all clear now. Forster was goin' broke for lack o' water, an' he was tryin' to rustle Smoke so ragged that Smoke would have to sell out to him. Lew Mustain was afeard you knew that . . . that's why he didn't want you talkin' to Smoke Bettles! Forster offered yuh a job so's to watch yuh!"

COMPREHENSION . . . and the greatest contentment he had known in three years . . . swept the pain from Mike's wounds. "But what made Bettles so anxious for my scalp, an' who fired them shots what turned the herd back from the Border?"

"I did, amigo!" Bat answered. "I come to, an' I seen things had to be done . . . I did em!"

Smoke Bettles answered the other question himself. "Some time when you been rustled right to the door o' the poorhouse, Mike, you'll understand why I felt so mean against jaspers like I thought you was. Naturally I didn't figger you'd come back to yore old stampin' grounds unless you aimed to go back to the same way o' makin' a livin'. I'm admittin' I was wrong, Mike, an' I'm askin' you to go to work for me!"

Mike's eyes swung to Bat Pinner's gnome-like face. "Thanks, but I couldn't bed down no place without Bat."

Bettles smiled. "There'll be a place for Bat too . . . whether he can ride or not. He can throw that old club o' his into the deepest hole he can find!"

Mike looked up at the stars. They had been friendly, after all. He had finished the trail back.

Gunsmoke Grubstake

by
JOHN CARLISLE

Author of "The Wild Bunch Rides to Hell," etc.

Old Man Gaunt went over the Sierra Pinta on his last prospecting trip without even a grubstake, and then that bandit pack of Mexican ladrones robbed and shot him—into a strange streak of luck!

OLD Man Gaunt was thirsty—very, very thirsty. He'd been thirsty before on his long prospecting trips, but this seemed worse. Maybe it was because what he had feared for so long had come to pass—Seth Masters had turned him down when he had asked for a grubstake in Nine Mile yesterday. The old man was not only dust dry, but he was about at the end of his rope. He stumbled over to the shade of a big red boulder, pushed his tattered hat back from his weathered and wrinkled forehead, and turned to his companion of many a hard trip, a patient, gray burro.

"Well, Maggie, ol' gal, I kinda reckon this is our last trip! I s'pose Seth just got tired a-buyin' us supplies! An' now we ain't got nothin' but a leetle whiskey, a mite o' biscuit, an' my tools left. We've took our last ore outa these danged hills! Them blackbirds won't have long to wait now, by the Jumpin' Joshua!"

He looked upward at the big, black buzzards, wheeling slowly in the burning desert sky. He felt so tired that it was an effort to turn his bearded face up against the pitiless blaze of the Arizona sun. His mouth was dry and cracked, and his faded gray eyes

burned in their sockets. He surveyed the whole scene slowly and painfully. He had just crossed the Sierra Pinta range—a barren waste of red, fantastically eroded boulders piled up in a grisly heap like a giant red skeleton whose bones had been seared and scarred for long ages under the desert sun. Just behind the Sierra Pinta lay the little cowtown of Nine Mile—one of those unexpected oases near the Border that support a fairly good herd of cattle. For nine miles the Coyote Wash was a large stream of good running water, and then it disappeared again into the sands. But the water served to grow a good band of grass along its borders, as well as many cottonwoods and sycamore to shade the cattle. Just now almost all the men of the town were away, driving the large herd of Herefords north to the railroad. To the west, Old Man Gaunt blinked at the wide expanse of the desolate Pinacate desert, stretching far into the mountain-rimmed distance. To the south lay the Sierra Madre in Mexico, its peaks an ominous hazy-blue on the horizon.

The old prospector blinked again, and rubbed his red-rimmed eyes with a dry, bony hand. He turned to the burro.

"Look, Maggie, look over there! Them's men a-horse-back as sure's I'm settin' here!"

The jenny wagged her ears in reply. Old Man Gaunt pulled at his grizzled beard. He rose wearily to his feet and, shading his eyes with his hand, peered again at the little dust cloud below him.

"By th' jumpin' Joshua, Maggie, we're goin' to get us a drink! C'mon!"

A half hour later the old man had struggled down to the edge of the vast Pinacate desert. He stumbled blindly and painfully down to the little band of horsemen coming up from the south. Two men detached themselves from the column and rode over to the old man. It wasn't until they were a few yards away that he realized that their steeple-crowned sombreros and their rolling, guttural language proclaimed them to be Mexicans. One of them called out to the leader of the cavalcade.

"Jefe! Es uno viejo minero!"

OLD Man Gaunt wiped the sweat from his eyes. His mind was alert now. This was a band of *ladrones*—of raiders from across the Border! He looked closely at the leader as he cantered up.

"Well, *viejito!* You are the first *gringo* we have seen on this trip, but you weel not be the last!" The leader threw back his dark head and laughed.

The blood drained out of Old Man Gaunt's face. He recognized the horseman now. He was Pedro Carreño, the notorious bandit chief of Sonora, Pedro Carreño, the outlaw who had chased the *rurales* out of his domain, and whose name inspired terror on both sides of the Line! The old man took a step backward.

"Ah, no, *amigo mio!* You are going to stay right here! It is *we* who are going to your pretty little town of Nine Mile! We have heard how all your men have gone to the north with the cattle! An' we are anxious to visit the town before they return!"

Pedro Carreño changed his tone. His dark eyes narrowed, and his voice became harsh. He turned to one of his men.

"Juan! Take what is of valúe from the pack on the burro! I weel take care of the *viejo*. Diego! Bring heem to me!"

The old prospector was seized roughly from behind and led up to the bandit chief. Pedro Carreño's eyes became little black slits, and his dark face was twisted. His words came slowly, each one chill with menace.

"Amigo, we have an old proverb that

says, *'Los muertos no hablan!'*—dead men do not talk, no?"

With a quick motion he lifted his arm and brought the barrel of his carbine down on the old man's head. The world roared and crashed in Old Man Gaunt's head as he fell. . . .

The old man struggled back to consciousness through waves of agony. His lips were cracked and bleeding and his eyes were glued shut with clotted blood. With an effort he wrenched them open. He was alone. The sun was half-way down the western sky, but its heat still beat in scorching waves on his head. He sat up, and the effort nearly made him faint. When his head had cleared again, Old Man Gaunt looked around. His burro was lying near him where the bandits had shot her, the meagre pack scattered on the ground. The old man became aware of a painful throbbing in his arm. He looked down, and saw that they had shot him, too. Hatred lent him strength, and he staggered over to the body of his dead burro.

"Maggie, ol' gal, I wisht they'd been better shots with me, an' had missed you plumb entirely!"

He looked at his scattered pack. They had taken his gun and ammunition, but, travelling light and fast, they had left the rest of the pack there. They had missed his little tin whiskey flask and his biscuits. His tools, his blasting outfit, and the rest were there. The old man broke the dry biscuits up and mixed them with a big swallow of whiskey. It burned like a hot flame down his throat, but in a moment he felt better.

As he sipped the hot whiskey he began to think about what the raiding party would do to the little town of Nine Mile, helpless with all its men away! Seth Masters, the mayor, was there, with a few men, but they could never resist a surprise attack. They and the women and children would all be slaughtered, and the town burned to the ground.

If there was only some way to warn them! The old man looked at the tracks of the bandits. They had not attempted to cross the Sierra Pinta, but had gone the long way around in the desert. Anyway, they would not try to attack until nightfall, when the surprise would be complete. Old Man Gaunt thought of the hard, rocky trail he had come over this morning. It was a short cut! He might possibly be able to get over it in time to warn the town! The distance he would have to walk, over the rocky tangle of the Sierra, would be only a fifth of the distance the bandits would have to go, to get to the town.

Old Man Gaunt put the half-empty whiskey-flask in his pocket, and got up. He thought of what Seth Masters had said to him in Nine Mile yesterday. . . .

"You're too old to be any good any more! I ain't grubstakin' you any longer, so get out an' stay out!"

As the remembered words awoke in his mind the old man felt like lying down once more. Why should he try to cross the terrible Sierra Pinta again to save a jasper like Seth Masters from the bandits? He might as well die right here, beside his last friend, Maggie! Then he thought of the women of the town—and the little children, even the ones who used to run after him and jeer at him when he trudged along. He couldn't let the Mexicans butcher them! His mind was made up now.

"By the jumpin' Joshua, I might as well give them blackbirds a leetle run for their money! They can get me just as well up on the Sierra as down here! I've got an idee—wait'll I get my pack!"

The old man went over to his scattered pack and rummaged around. He picked up some matches and a little canvas-covered packet. Then he headed

back up the Sierra Pinta, back into the red inferno of rocks, as fast as he could.

The blood-red sun was just sinking below the western rim when Old Man Gaunt crossed the northern-most ridge of the Sierra Pinta. He could just make out the dust-hazy cottonwoods that sheltered the town of Nine Mile. The last rays of the sun were reflected from the whitewashed walls of a few adobe houses. He could see nothing of the cavalcade that would come in from the west.

He struggled down into a rocky barranca as fast as his bleeding legs would take him. His breath came in short, agonized groans. The clothes were almost completely ripped away from his cut and bleeding body. But he clutched the little canvas packet in his good hand. Every now and then he scrutinized the lengthening shadows in the west.

The blue shadows were deepening into purple-black, a few stars were appearing, and the night wind began to sigh in the desert when Old Man Gaunt first saw the thin black line moving slowly toward the town. It kept in the shadows of the mountain, like a rattlesnake, crawling its sinister path toward its victim. The old man changed his course, and headed noiselessly down to intercept the bandits. He kept on until he could hear the muted roll of hoofs and the subdued murmur of accoutrements.

The old prospector opened his canvas kit and took out some matches. He crouched behind a rock. In a moment shadows loomed near, and he could see high-crowned hats against the stars. He heard a muttered oath in Spanish, then a savage order for silence.

Old Man Gaunt took out his jackknife and several small objects from the little packet. He opened his knife and worked fast. Just as the cavalcade was abreast of him, he struck a match, then stepped quickly back behind another rock. The bandits heard him. A quick command crackled.

But at that moment the silence was shattered by a sharp explosion like that of a pistol shot. There was another, then another. Pandemonium broke loose. Horses bucked and plunged. The bandits shouted hoarsely and opened fire in all directions. The night was split wide open with sharp flashes of fire and the roaring of thirty-thirties and forty-fives.

Old Man Gaunt looked down at the faraway lights of the town. This ought to be enough to warn them. He felt happy and relaxed. But the let-down was too much for his pain-shocked old body, and he sank into blackness.

Old Man Gaunt was brought back to consciousness by the sound of voices—far away at first, then nearer. He lay still for a moment, half-consciously realizing that his racked limbs would torture him if he moved. He became aware that someone was bathing his face with water. It chilled him awake. He opened his eyes, and looked up at the face of Seth Masters. There was a large fire nearby, and several cowpunchers around it. Seth Masters was saying something.

"Ol' timer, you sure made things hum for them Mex hombres, an' you sure saved the town! We heard the noise an' came out, an' them jaspers was so skeered they was shootin' at each other. We didn't have no trouble with the rest a-tall. But one thing we can't figger out. How in hell did you get 'em to start the rumpus? We didn't find no gun on you a-tall!"

The old prospector felt better. He smiled weakly up at the mayor of Nine Mile.

"Seth, you didn't grubstake me, but I kinda figgered this'd be my last trip, so I left town all right—with what stuff

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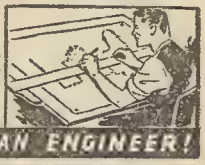

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I had. The greasers got me th' other side of the Sierra Pinta, but they left me my blastin'-caps! I crimped them caps as short as I could, an' set 'em off right under them! Jumpin' Joshua, it was all I needed to make things hot for them!"

Seth Masters had an unusual light in his eyes as he looked down at the grizzled old man. His throat was tight and he found it hard to speak.

"Ol' timer, you sure took your last trip, but you ain't got your last grubstake, a-tall! From now on, you got a permanent grubstake with us, ain't that so, boys?"

The answering chorus made Old Man Gaunt feel even better. He forgot aching bones and torn flesh as he rode at the head of the small procession, into a town he never would want to leave again.

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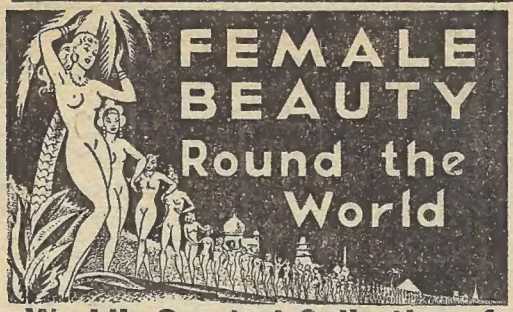

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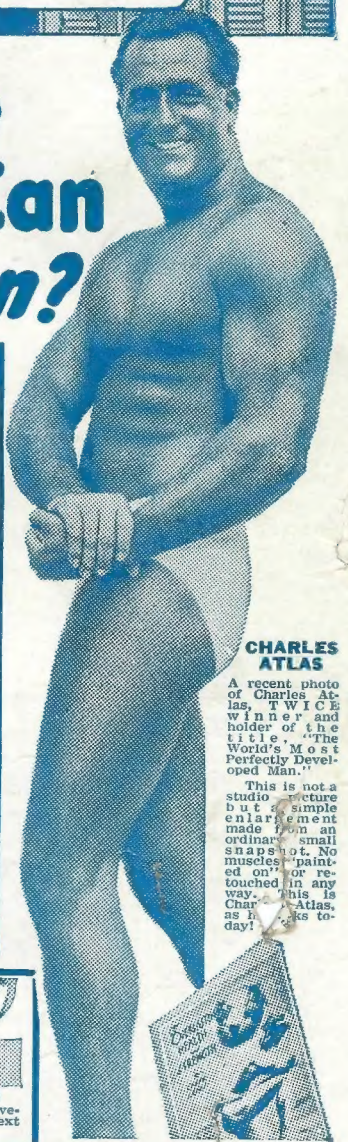

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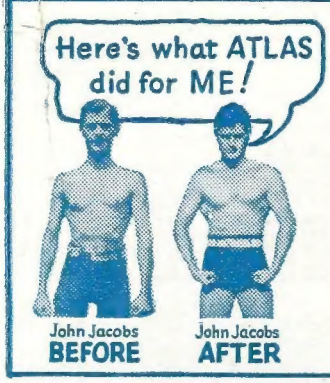

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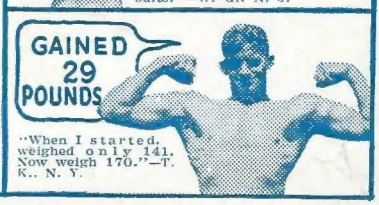

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